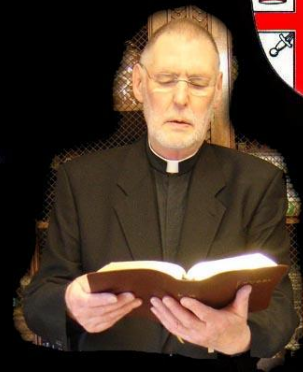


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**Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet  
and a light unto my path.  
Psalm 119: 105**



ds. Philippe L. De Coster, B.Th., D.D.

**Evangelical House Churches**

## **Berea Bible Handbook – Part Four**

**Ezra – Nehemiah – Esther**

**Research and study by Rev. Philippe L. De Coster, B.Th., D.D.**



## The Pentateuch and Historical Books Review

The Pentateuch, the name by which the first five books of the Bible are designated, is derived from two Greek words, *pente*, "five," and *teuchos*, a "volume," thus signifying the fivefold volume. Originally these books formed one continuous work, as in the Hebrew manuscripts they are still connected in one unbroken roll. At what time they were divided into five portions, each having a separate title, is not known, but it is certain that the distinction dates at or before the time of the *Septuagint* translation. The names they bear in our English version are borrowed from the *Septuagint*, and they were applied by those Greek translators as descriptive of the principal subjects--the leading contents of the respective books. In the later Scriptures they are frequently comprehended under the general designation, *The Law*, *The Book of the Law*, since, to give a detailed account of the preparations for, and the delivery of, the divine code, with all the civil and sacred institutions that were peculiar to the ancient economy, is the object to which they are exclusively devoted. They have always been placed at the beginning of the Bible, not only on account of their priority in point of time, but as forming an appropriate and indispensable introduction to the rest of the sacred books. The numerous and oft-recurring references made in the later Scriptures to the events, the ritual, and the doctrines of the ancient Church would have not only lost much of their point and significance, but have been absolutely unintelligible without the information which these five books contain. They constitute the groundwork or basis on which the whole fabric of revelation rests, and a knowledge of the authority and importance that is thus attached to them will sufficiently account for the determined assaults that infidels have made on these books, as well as for the zeal and earnestness which the friends of the truth have displayed in their defence.

The Mosaic origin of the Pentateuch is established by the concurring voices both of Jewish and Christian tradition; and their unanimous testimony is supported by the internal character and statements of the work itself. That Moses did keep a written record of the important transactions relative to the Israelites is attested by his own express affirmation. For in relating the victory over the Amalekites, which he was commanded by divine authority to record, the language employed, "write this for a memorial in a book" [*Hebrew*, the book], ( Exodus 17:14 ), shows that that narrative was to form part of a register already in progress, and various circumstances combine to prove that this register was a continuous history of the special goodness and care of divine providence in the choice, protection, and guidance of the Hebrew nation. First, there are the repeated assertions of Moses himself that the events which chequered the experience of that people were written down as they occurred (see Exodus 24:4-7 ; 34:27 ;

Numbers 33:2 ). Secondly, there are the testimonies borne in various parts of the later historical books to the Pentateuch as a work well known, and familiar to all the people (see Joshua 1:8 ; 23:6 ; 24:26 ; 1 Kings 2:3 , and so on and forth.) Thirdly, frequent references are made in the works of the prophets to the facts recorded in the books of Moses (compare Isaiah 1:9 with Genesis 19:1 ; Isaiah 12:2 with Exodus 15:2 ; Isaiah 51:2 with Genesis 12:2 ; Isaiah 54:9 with Genesis 8:21 Genesis 8:22 ; compare Hosea 9:10 with Numbers 25:3 ; Hosea 11:8 with Genesis 19:24 ; Hosea 12:4 with Genesis 32:24 Genesis 32:25 ; Hosea 12:12 with Genesis 28:5 ; 29:20 ; compare Joel 1:9 with Numbers 15:4-7 ; 28:7-14 ; Deuteronomy 12:6 Deuteronomy 12:7 ; Deuteronomy 16:10 Deuteronomy 11 ; compare Amos 2:9 with Numbers 21:21 ; Amos 4:4 with Numbers 28:3 ; Amos 4:11 with Genesis 19:24 ; Amos 9:13 with Leviticus 26:5 ; compare Micah 6:5 with Numbers 22:25 ; Micah 6:6 with Leviticus 9:2 ; Micah 6:15 with Leviticus 26:16 , etc.) Fourthly, the testimony of Christ and the Apostles is repeatedly borne to the books of Moses ( Matthew 19:7 ; Luke 16:29 ; 24:27 ; John 1:17 ; 7:19 ; Acts 3:22 ; 28:23 ; Romans 10:5 ). Indeed the references are so numerous, and the testimonies so distinctly borne to the existence of the Mosaic books throughout the whole history of the Jewish nation, and the unity of character, design, and style pervading these books is so clearly perceptible, notwithstanding the rationalistic assertions of their forming a series of separate and unconnected fragments, that it may with all safety be said, there is immensely stronger and more varied evidence in proof of their being the authorship of Moses than of any of the Greek or Roman classics being the productions of the authors whose names they bear. But admitting that the Pentateuch was written by Moses, an important question arises, as to whether the books which compose it have reached us in an authentic form; whether they exist genuine and entire as they came from the hands of their author. In answer to this question, it might be sufficient to state that, in the public and periodical rehearsals of the law in the solemn religious assemblies of the people, implying the existence of numerous copies, provision was made for preserving the integrity of "The Book of the Law." But besides this, two remarkable facts, the one of which occurred before and the other after the captivity, afford conclusive evidence of the genuineness and authenticity of the Pentateuch. The first is the discovery in the reign of Josiah of the autograph copy which was deposited by Moses in the ark of the testimony, and the second is the schism of the Samaritans, who erected a temple on Mount Gerizim, and who, appealing to the Mosaic law as the standard of their faith and worship equally with the Jews, watched with jealous care over every circumstance that could affect the purity of the Mosaic record. There is the strongest reason, then, for believing that the Pentateuch, as it exists now, is substantially the same as it came from the hands of Moses. The appearance of a later hand, it is true, is traceable in the narrative of the death of Moses at the close of Deuteronomy, and some few interpolations,

such as inserting the altered names of places, may have been made by Ezra, who revised and corrected the version of the ancient Scriptures. But, substantially, the Pentateuch is the genuine work of Moses, and many, who once impugned its claims to that character, and looked upon it as the production of a later age, have found themselves compelled, after a full and unprejudiced investigation of the subject, to proclaim their conviction that its authenticity is to be fully relied on.

The genuineness and authenticity of the Pentateuch being admitted, the inspiration and canonical authority of the work follow as a necessary consequence. The admission of Moses to the privilege of frequent and direct communion with God ( Exodus 25:22 ; 33:3 ; Numbers 7:89 ; 9:8 ); his repeated and solemn declarations that he spoke and wrote by command of God; the submissive reverence that was paid to the authority of his precepts by all classes of the Jewish people, including the king himself ( Deuteronomy 17:18 ; 27:3 ); and the acknowledgment of the divine mission of Moses by the writers of the New Testament, all prove the inspired character and authority of his books. The Pentateuch possessed the strongest claims on the attention of the Jewish people, as forming the standard of their faith, the rule of their obedience, the record of their whole civil and religious polity. But it is interesting and important to all mankind, inasmuch as besides revealing the origin and early development of the divine plan of grace, it is the source of all authentic knowledge, giving the true philosophy, history, geography, and chronology of the ancient world. Finally, the Pentateuch "is indispensable to the whole revelation contained in the Bible; for Genesis being the legitimate preface to the law; the law being the natural introduction to the Old Testament; and the whole a prelude to the gospel revelation, it could not have been omitted. What the four Gospels are in the New, the five books of Moses are in the Old Testament."

**GENESIS**, the book of the origin or production of all things, consists of two parts: the first, comprehended in the first through eleventh chapters, gives a general history; the second, contained in the subsequent chapters, gives a special history. The two parts are essentially connected; the one, which sets out with an account of the descent of the human race from a single pair, the introduction of sin into the world, and the announcement of the scheme of divine mercy for repairing the ruins of the fall, was necessary to pave the way for relating the other, namely, the call of Abraham, and the selection of his posterity for carrying out the gracious purpose of God. An evident unity of method, therefore, pervades this book, and the information contained in it was of the greatest importance to the Hebrew people, as without it they could not have understood the frequent references made in their law to the purposes and promises of God

regarding themselves. The arguments that have been already adduced as establishing the Mosaic origin of the Pentateuch prove of course that Moses was the author of Genesis. The few passages on which the rationalists grounded their assertions that it was the composition of a later age have been successfully shown to warrant no such conclusion; the use of Egyptian words and the minute acquaintance with Egyptian life and manners, displayed in the history of Joseph, harmonize with the education of Moses, and whether he received his information by immediate revelation, from tradition, or from written documents, it comes to us as the authentic work of an author who wrote as he was inspired by the Holy Ghost ( 2 Peter 1:21 ).

**EXODUS**, a "going forth," derives its name from its being occupied principally with a relation of the departure of the Israelites from Egypt, and the incidents that immediately preceded as well as followed that memorable migration. Its authorship by Moses is distinctly asserted by himself ( Exodus 24:4 ), as well as by our Lord ( Mark 12:26 ; Luke 20:37 ). Besides, the thorough knowledge it exhibits of the institutions and usages of the ancient Egyptians and the minute geographical details of the journey to Sinai, establish in the clearest manner the authenticity of this book.

**LEVITICUS**. So called from its treating of the laws relating to the ritual, the services, and sacrifices of the Jewish religion, the superintendence of which was entrusted to the Levitical priesthood. It is chiefly, however, the duties of the priests, "the sons of Aaron," which this book describes; and its claim to be the work of Moses is established by the following passages:-- 2 Chronicles 30:16 ; Nehemiah 8:14 ; Jeremiah 7:22-23 ; Ezekiel 20:11 ; Matthew 8:4 ; Luke 2:22 ; John 8:5; Romans 10:4 ; 13:9 ; 2 Corinthians 6:16 ; Galatians 3:12 ; 1 Peter 1:16.

**NUMBERS**. This book is so called because it contains an account of the enumeration and arrangement of the Israelites. The early part of it, from the first through the tenth chapters, appears to be a supplement to Leviticus, being occupied with relating the appointment of the Levites to the sacred offices. The journal of the march through the wilderness is then given as far as Numbers 21:20 ; after which the early incidents of the invasion are narrated. One direct quotation only from this book ( Numbers 16:5 ) is made in the New Testament ( 2 Timothy 2:19 ); but indirect references to it by the later sacred writers are very numerous.

**DEUTERONOMY**, the *second law*, a title which plainly shows what is the object of this book, namely, a recapitulation of the law. It was given in the form of public addresses to the people; and as Moses spoke in the prospect of his speedy removal, he enforced obedience to it by many forcible appeals to the

Israelites, concerning their long and varied experience both of the mercies and the judgments of God. The minute notices of the heathen people with whom they had come in contact, but who afterward disappeared from the pages of history, as well as the accounts of the fertility and products of Canaan, and the counsels respecting the conquest of that country, fix the date of this book and the time of its composition by the hand of Moses. The close, however, must have been added by another; and, indeed, it is supposed by some to have formed the original preface to the Book of Joshua.

**JOSHUA.** The title of this book is derived from the pious and valiant leader whose achievements it relates and who is commonly supposed to have been its author. The objections to this idea are founded chiefly on the clause, "unto this day," which occurs several times ( Joshua 4:9 ; 6:25 ; 8:28 ). But this, at least in the case of Rahab, is no valid reason for rejecting the idea of his authorship; for assuming what is most probable, that this book was composed toward the close of Joshua's long career, or compiled from written documents left by him, Rahab might have been still alive. A more simple and satisfactory way of accounting for the frequent insertion of the clause, "unto this day," is the opinion that it was a comment introduced by Ezra, when revising the sacred canon; and this difficulty being removed, the direct proofs of the book having been produced by a witness of the transactions related in it, the strong and vivid descriptions of the passing scenes, and the use of the words "we" and "us," ( Joshua 5:1-6 ), viewed in connection with the fact, that, after his farewell address to the people, Joshua "wrote these words in the book of the law of God" ( Joshua 24:26 )--all afford strong presumptive proof that the entire book was the work of that eminent individual. Its inspiration and canonical authority are fully established by the repeated testimonies of other Scripture writers (compare Joshua 6:26 with 1 Kings 16:34 ;compare Joshua 10:13 with Habakkuk 3:11 ; Joshua 3:14 with Acts 7:45 ; Joshua 6:17-23 with Hebrews 11:30 ; Joshua 2:1-24 with James 2:25 ; Psalm 44:2 ; 68:12-14 ; 78:54-55 ). As a narrative of God's faithfulness in giving the Israelites possession of the promised land, this history is most valuable, and bears the same character as a sequel to the Pentateuch, that the Acts of the Apostles do to the Gospels.

**JUDGES** is the title given to the next book, from its containing the history of those non-regal rulers who governed the Hebrews from the time of Joshua to that of Eli, and whose functions in time of peace consisted chiefly in the administration of justice, although they occasionally led the people in their wars against their public enemies. The date and authorship of this book are not precisely known. It is certain, however, that it preceded the Second Book of Samuel (compare Judges 9:35 with 2 Samuel 11:21 ), as well as the conquest of Jerusalem by David (compare Judges 1:21 with 2 Samuel 5:6 ). Its author was in all probability Samuel, the last of the judges (see Judges 19:1 Judges 21:25 ),

and the date of the first part of it is fixed in the reign of Saul, while the five chapters at the close might not have been written till after David's establishment as king in Israel (see Judges 18:31 ). It is a fragmentary history, being a collection of important facts and signal deliverances at different times and in various parts of the land, during the intermediate period of three hundred years between Joshua and the establishment of the monarchy. The inspired character of this book is confirmed by allusions to it in many passages of Scripture (compare Judges 4:2 ; 6:14 with 1 Samuel 12:9-12 ; Judges 9:53 with 2 Samuel 11:21 ; Judges 7:25 with Psalms 83:11 ; compare Judges 5:4 Judges 5:5 with Psalms 7:5 ; Judges 13:5 ; 16:17 with Matthew 2:13-23 ; Acts 13:20 ; Hebrews 11:32 ).

**RUTH** is properly a supplement to the preceding book, to which, in fact, it was appended in the ancient Jewish canon. Although it relates an episode belonging to the time of the Judges, its precise date is unknown. It appears certain, however, that it could not have been written prior to the time of Samuel (see Ruth 4:17-22 ), who is generally supposed to have been its author; and this opinion, in addition to other reasons on which it rests, is confirmed by Ruth 4:7 , where it is evident that the history was not compiled till long after the transactions recorded. The inspiration and canonical authority of the book is attested by the fact of Ruth's name being inserted by Matthew in the Saviour's genealogy [ Matthew 1:5 ].

**THE FIRST AND SECOND BOOKS OF SAMUEL.** The two were, by the ancient Jews, conjoined so as to make one book, and in that form could be called the Book of Samuel with more propriety than now, the second being wholly occupied with the relation of transactions that did not take place till after the death of that eminent judge. Accordingly, in the *Septuagint* and the *Vulgate*, it is called the First and Second Books of Kings. The early portion of the First Book, down to the end of the twenty-fourth chapter, was probably written by Samuel; while the rest of it and the whole of the Second, are commonly ascribed to Nathan and Gad, founding the opinion on 1 Chronicles 29:29 . Commentators, however, are divided about this, some supposing that the statements in 1 Samuel 2:26 ; 3:1 , indicate the hand of the judge himself, or a contemporary; while some think, from 1 Samuel 6:18 ; 12:5 ; 27:6 , that its composition must be referred to a later age. It is probable, however, that these supposed marks of an after-period were interpolations of Ezra. This uncertainty, however, as to the authorship does not affect the inspired authority of the book, which is indisputable, being quoted in the New Testament ( 1 Samuel 13:14 in Acts 13:22 , and 2 Samuel 7:14 in Hebrews 1:5 ), as well as in many of the Psalms.

**THE FIRST AND SECOND BOOKS OF KINGS**, in the ancient copies of the *Hebrew Bible*, constitute one book. Various titles have been given them; in the *Septuagint* and the *Vulgate* they are called the Third and Fourth Books of Kings. The authorship of these books is unknown; but the prevailing opinion is that they were compiled by Ezra, or one of the later prophets, from the ancient documents that are so frequently referred to in the course of the history as of public and established authority. Their inspired character was acknowledged by the Jewish Church, which ranked them in the sacred canon; and, besides, it is attested by our Lord, who frequently quotes from them (compare 1 Kings 17:9 ; 2 Kings 5:14 with Luke 4:24-27 ; 1 Kings 10:1 with Matthew 12:42 ).

**THE FIRST AND SECOND BOOKS OF CHRONICLES** were also considered as one by the ancient Jews, who called them "words of days," that is, diaries or journals, being probably compiled from those registers that were kept by the king's historiographers of passing occurrences. In the *Septuagint* the title given them is *Paraleipomenon*, "of things omitted," that is, the books are supplementary because many things unnoticed in the former books are here recorded; and not only the omissions are supplied, but some narratives extended while others are added. The authorship is commonly ascribed to Ezra, whose leading object seems to have been to show the division of families, possessions, &c., before the captivity, with a view to the exact restoration of the same order after the return from Babylon. Although many things are restated and others are exact repetitions of what is contained in Kings, there is so much new and important information that, as JEROME has well said, the Chronicles furnish the means of comprehending parts of the New Testament, which must have been unintelligible without them. They are frequently referred to by Christ and the Apostles as forming part of "the Word of God" (see the genealogies in Matthew 1:1-16 ; Luke 3:23-38 ; compare 2 Chronicles 19:7 with 1 Peter 1:17 ; 2 Chronicles 24:19-21 with Matthew 23:32-35 ).

**EZRA** was, along with Nehemiah, reckoned one book by the ancient Jews, who called them the First and Second Books of Ezra, and they are still designated by Roman Catholic writers the First and Second Books of Esdras. This book naturally divides itself into two parts or sections, the one contained in the first six chapters, and which relates the circumstances connected with the return of the first detachment of Babylonish exiles under Zerubbabel with the consequent rebuilding of the temple and the re-establishment of the divine service. The other part, embraced in the four concluding chapters, narrates the journey of a second caravan of returning captives under the conduct of Ezra himself, who was invested with powers to restore, in all its splendour, the entire system of the Jewish ritual. The general opinion of the Church in every succeeding age has



been that Ezra was the author of this book. The chief objection is founded on Ezra 5:4 , where the words, "Then said we unto them after this manner, What are the names of the men that make this building?" have occasioned a surmise that the first portion of the book was not written by Ezra, who did not go to Jerusalem for many years after. But a little attention will show the futility of this objection, as the words in question did not refer to the writer, but were used by Tatnai and his associates ( Ezra 5:3 ). The style and unity of object in the book clearly prove it to have been the production of but one author. The canonical authority of this book is well established; but another under the name of Ezra's rejected as apocryphal.

**NEHEMIAH** appears to have been the author of this book, from his usually writing in his own name, and indeed, except in those parts which are unmistakably later editions or borrowed from public documents, he usually employs the first person. The major portion of the book is occupied with a history of Nehemiah's twelve years' administration in Jerusalem, after which he returned to his duties in Shushan. At a later period he returned with new powers and commenced new and vigorous measures of reform, which are detailed in the later chapters of the book.

**ESTHER** derives its name from the Jewess, who, having become wife of the king of Persia, employed her royal influence to effect a memorable deliverance for the persecuted Church of God. Various opinions are embraced and supported as to the authorship of this book, some ascribing it to Ezra, to Nehemiah, or to Mordecai. The preponderance of authorities is in favour of the last. The historical character of the book is undoubted, since, besides many internal evidences, its authenticity is proved by the strong testimony of the feast of Purim, the celebration of which can be traced up to the events which are described in this book. Its claim, however, to canonical authority has been questioned on the ground that the name of God does not once occur in it. But the uniform tradition both of the Jewish and the Christian Churches supports this claim, which nothing in the book tends to shake; while it is a record of the superintending care of divine providence over his chosen people, with which it is of the utmost importance the Church should be furnished. The name of God is strangely enough omitted, but the presence of God is felt throughout the history; and the whole tone and tendency of the book is so decidedly subservient to the honour of God and the cause of true religion that it has been generally received by the Church in all ages into the sacred canon.



## The Chaldean Empire

*One of history's great ironies is that, despite being visually oriented creatures, we often do not know what famous people looked like. The further back in time we go the more difficult the reconstruction is. Ancient people practiced portraiture, although their efforts may have been hampered by stylistic conventions. Egyptian artwork is recognizable at a glance, and Mesopotamian art, with its weightier, angst-laden form is easily distinguished. Their stylized images generally do not allow for direct correlations to Renaissance portraits. When searching for specific individuals, even famous ones, however, the likeness may be completely absent.*

*Among the most notorious (from a biblical viewpoint) ancient emperors was Nebuchadnezzar. Demonized for his role in the destruction of the sacred temple in Jerusalem, Nebuchadnezzar becomes the hypostasis of Antiochus IV Epiphanes in Daniel and even worse in Christian apocalypticism. For all that, Nebuchadnezzar seems to have been a jolly good fellow. An able emperor, he was noted for his building an empire and the loveliest gardens in Iraq. Yet no images of him survive. They may be out there, buried, waiting to be found, but we do not know what this emperor looked like.*

*A recent web search nevertheless turned up the clearly Greek version of that famous, if forgotten, face on an onyx cameo. It even appears on Wikipedia's*

*page for Nebuchadnezzar II as an actual image of the man, the legend; this despite the fact that William Hayes Ward, in the American Journal of Archaeology in 1887, explained how the cameo was an early forgery. Originally an “eye of Nabu,” the proto-cameo was the eye of a statue, the pupil of which was carved by a reconstructionist Greek artisan into what he supposed Nebuchadnezzar looked like – a Greek warrior – centuries after the fact.*

*This might be a simple historical curiosity were it not for the fact that evangelical websites and wikis are quick to claim that this clean-shaven, Olympian-profiled vision of masculinity is an actual image of Nebuchadnezzar. Why? He occurs in the Bible and therefore must be “proved” to have been historical. Not only for the real Chaldean Empire, but also for the fictional one concocted by Daniel. Seeing is believing. While history did not see fit to leave a lasting image of Nebuchadnezzar, evangelical websites will use the tried and true god-of-the-gaps methodology to show us what he actually looked like (not).*



*A hilltop view of the ancient city of Babylon, where King Nebuchadnezzar II, whose life spanned 630-562 B.C., built his hanging gardens, one of the Seven Wonders of the World.*

# Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther

**Overview of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther**

Ezra 1-6	Esther	Ezra 7-10		Nehemiah
Restoration under Zerubbabel	58 year gap	Reformation under Ezra	13 year gap	Reconstruction under Nehemiah
538-515 B.C.		457 B.C.		444-425 B.C
Temple		People		Walls
Prophets: Haggai & Zechariah		—		Prophet: Malachi
1 <sup>st</sup> return (about 50,000 or 2%)		2 <sup>nd</sup> return (about 2,000)		3 <sup>rd</sup> return

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**Persian Kings in the Three Books**

Ezra 1-6	559-530 B.C.	Cyrus “the Great”
	530-522 B.C.	Cambyses (also called Artaxerxes or Ahasuerus)
	522 B.C.	Smerdis (not mentioned)
	521-486 B.C.	Darius I “the Great”
Esther	486-464 B.C.	Ahasuerus (also called Xerxes) (Esther’s husband)
Ezra 7-10 & Nehemiah	464-423 B.C.	Artaxerxes I (Esther’s stepson, Ezra’s supporter & Nehemiah’s boss)
	423-404 B.C.	Darius II (briefly mentioned in Neh.12:22)

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**Key People in the 3 Books**

Place	Years	Good Guys	Bad Guys
Jerusalem	538-515 B.C.	Joshua & Zerubbabel	Samaritans
Shushan (or Susa), Persia	483-473 B.C.	Mordecai, Esther, Ahasuerus	Haman
Jerusalem	457-425 B.C.	Ezra & Nehemiah	Sanballat & Tobiah

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First and Second Samuel, First and Second Kings, and First and Second Chronicles we have seen, record the history of God’s people from the time of the Judges to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. God’s prophet, Jeremiah, had foretold that His people would be captives in a foreign land for seventy years (Jeremiah 25:11,12; 29:10). The period of captivity began in 606 B.C. when many of the king’s family were taken to Babylon. Daniel, Shadrach, Misheck, and Abed-Nego were among these captives.

Ten years later, in 596 B.C. a second group were taken as captives to Babylon. This group was made up of priests and skilled craftsmen. Ezekiel, one of the greatest of God’s prophets, was among them. Then, after another ten years, in 586 B. C., when the Jews in Judah continued to rebel against Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar came to Jerusalem with his army. He destroyed the city, including the beautiful temple built by King Solomon. He took the rest of the people to Babylon to be slaves.

In 539 B.C. the Babylonian Empire was conquered by the Medes and the Persians. They were led by Darius and Cyrus. Soon after this, King Cyrus gave the Jews permission to return to their homeland. He also gave them permission to rebuild the temple of God (2 Chronicles 36:22,23; Ezra 1:1-4). The first group

of captives returned in 536 B.C. They were led by Zerubbabel, who was a descendant of King David. It is important to remember that the seventy years of the Babylonian Captivity lasted from 606 B.C. until 536 B.C.

There were three different times the Jews were taken into captivity in Babylon. There were also three different times that Jews were permitted to return to their homeland. The first group of Jews who returned were led by Zerubbabel. This was in 536 B.C. The second group of Jews returned in 458 B. C. They were led by Ezra, a scribe of God's law. The third group to return were led by Nehemiah in 444 B.C.

Each one of these three leaders had an important job to do in rebuilding the nation of Judah. The temple of God was rebuilt under Zerubbabel's leadership. Ezra reorganized the temple worship. Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem.

The three books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther tell the history of God's people during the rule of the Persian Empire. Ezra and Nehemiah tell of the captives who returned to Judah. Esther tells what happened to God's people who remained in Persia.



### ***The Cyrus Cylinder***

*From Babylon, southern Iraq. Babylonian, about 539-530 BC*

#### ***A declaration of good kingship.***

*This clay cylinder is inscribed in Babylonian cuneiform with an account by Cyrus, king of Persia (559-530 BC) of his conquest of Babylon in 539 BC and capture of Nabonidus, the last Babylonian king. Cyrus claims to have achieved this with the aid of Marduk, the god of Babylon. He then describes measures of relief he brought to the inhabitants of the city, and tells how he returned a number of images of gods, which Nabonidus had collected in Babylon, to their proper temples throughout Mesopotamia and western Iran. At the same time he arranged for the restoration of these temples, and organized the return to their homelands of a number of people who had been held in Babylonia by the Babylonian kings. Although the Jews are not mentioned in this document, their*



*return to Palestine following their deportation by Nebuchadnezzar II, was part of this policy. This cylinder has sometimes been described as the 'first charter of human rights', but it in fact reflects a long tradition in Mesopotamia where, from as early as the third millennium BC, kings began their reigns with declarations of reforms.*

## **EZRA**

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah (one book-in the Hebrew Bible) trace the story of the return of the people of God to the land of Israel after the 70-year captivity in Babylon. Scholars differ as to the chronological order of the books, some maintaining that the events of Nehemiah occur before those of Ezra. Other historians place the return under Zerubbabel (recounted in the first six chapters of Ezra) as the earliest return, dated approximately 537 B.C., with Ezra and Nehemiah leading later returns in that order. Be that as it may, we shall follow the biblical order so that we might learn the meaning of these events in the spiritual parallel of our individual lives.

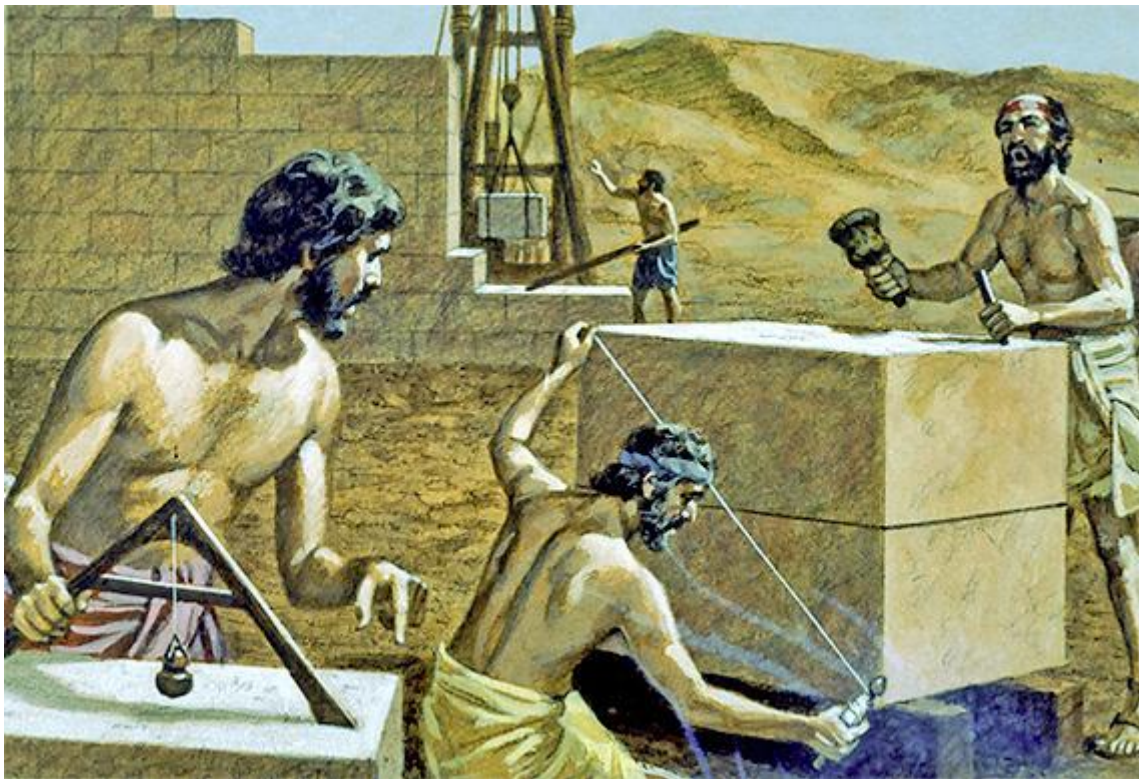
Ezra-Nehemiah is the Old Testament equivalent of the Acts of the Apostles--it is a book of new beginnings. Just as Acts narrates the early history of the church through the work of the apostles, Ezra-Nehemiah narrates the re-establishment of the people of God after the exile through the work of Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Allen explores Ezra-Nehemiah as a single literary text made up of three parts telling the story of three missions and the opposition they meet with. Wise and insightful, Leslie Allen has written a commentary that illuminates these texts and their intended message. Esther is a story about a young girl who becomes queen. Laniak's thoughtful commentary examines this narrative as a story with many levels of meaning. Esther is about the minority Jewish community in the dependent state of Diaspora, navigating a precarious existence in two worlds, and it is about the triumph of right over wrong, of God's people over their enemies.

The book of Ezra begins with the same words which close the book of 2 Chronicles. They recount the decree of Cyrus, king of Persia, to reestablish and restore the house of the Lord at Jerusalem. This gives us our clue to the meaning of Ezra, for it is a book which recounts the method of God in restoring a heart which has fallen into sin.

The book divides naturally into the ministries of two men: Zerubbabel, chapters 1-6 and Ezra, chapters 7-10. Both of these men led expeditions of Jewish captives back to Jerusalem from Babylon. Zerubbabel was a descendant of

David and thus of the kingly line. Ezra descended from Aaron and is therefore a priest. This suggests immediately that in the work of restoration both a king and a priest are needed. The work of the king is to build, or in this case, to rebuild. The work of the priest is to cleanse. Restoration in an individual life always requires these two ministries. There is need to rebuild the character through a recognition of the kingship and lordship of Jesus Christ in the human spirit. Such building involves the recognition of God's right to own and direct us and to change us according to His will.

But restoration also involves cleansing. The spirit and the soul are to be cleansed by our great High Priest, who is able to wash away our guilt, tidy up our past and restore us to a place of fellowship and blessedness before God.



*Zerubbabel, a man greatly favoured by God*

## **ZERUBBABEL**

Under Zerubbabel an early return takes place. This kingly descendant led about 50,000 people from Babylon back to Jerusalem. This is far fewer in number than those who have returned to the land in our own day, but the biblical record attaches great importance to this first return. Cyrus, the king of Persia, may have known of Isaiah's predictions concerning his instrumentality in the hands of

God, for he gave willing aid to the Jews who returned, putting in their hands again the vessels of the Temple and giving them goods and animals (Ezra 1:7).

When they came to Jerusalem it was the seventh month of the year and they arrived in time to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. This feast (also called the feast of ingathering) was the time when Israel dwelt in booths to remind them of their pilgrim character. This feast also looks forward to the eventual regathering of Israel from their vast worldwide dispersion to celebrate the personal reign of Messiah upon the earth in great power and glory.

The careful list of those who returned, given in chapter 2, indicates that not only did various families and clans go back but also a company of priests, a smaller number of Levites, certain servants who were to assist the Levites in their service, and a number of people whose genealogy was somewhat uncertain.

Their first act upon return was to build an altar on the original Temple site, in the midst of the ruins. Under the open sky they erected an altar to God and began to worship and offer sacrifice as the Law of Moses had bid them. This is most significant, for the first act of a heart that really desires to return from wandering in darkness and the ways of the world to real fellowship with God is to erect an altar. The altar is the symbol of divine ownership and involves sacrifice, worship and praise. The sacrifice is that of our right to run our own lives; worship is the enjoyment of the restored relationship where the heart is ministered to by the only One who can fully meet its needs; praise is that of a rejoicing heart.

The second thing they did was to lay the foundation of the Temple (3:10). This work when finished was met with mixed feeling, for some of the people shouted with a great shout of joy and others, including those who had seen the first Temple built by Solomon, wept with a loud voice, so that it was impossible to distinguish the shouts of joy from the sounds of weeping (3:13). Perhaps you too may have felt this way. Have you ever returned to God after a time of coldness and withdrawal, with a great sense of joy as the foundations of fellowship were re-laid by the Spirit, yet with regret for the loss of wasted years? This is what is portrayed here. Tears of joy mingled with tears of sorrow as the people saw the Temple being rebuilt.

The third factor in the return of Zerubbabel was the immediate opposition which developed to the restoration of the Temple. Here we see portrayed the force at work in every human heart which immediately rises up to oppose everything God attempts to do. There is a great lesson here in how this force reveals itself. The opposition first appears as friendly solicitude. The people of the land



approached Zerubbabel and said, "Let us build with you, for we like you seek your God; and we have been sacrificing to Him since the days of Esar-haddon king of Assyria, who brought us up here" (4:2). This apparently friendly and openhearted desire to participate in the work marked a very subtle attack upon the returning exiles. It is not difficult to say no to an enemy who breathes fiery threats of slaughter, but when he comes dripping with solicitude and offers to help with your project it is difficult to say no.

But this Zerubbabel did, for he declined their offer of help and stated the Jews would do the work alone. It may have seemed a bit churlish, but it was not mere caprice, for God had commanded Israel not to fellowship with other nations or engage with them in joint enterprises concerning faith. It meant simply that God rejects utterly the philosophy of the world in carrying out His work in the world. There is a worldly religion, and a worldly philosophy which tries to interject the concepts and methods of the world into the lives of God's people. God has made it clear that these are to be rejected. The thinking of the world reflects the spirit of the devil, who is the god of this age. His philosophy is, "Advance yourself; do this for your own glory. Use religious ways to advance your own purposes and thus win admiration, power and fame. " But God rejects this principle in its totality.

When the offer of friendship was rejected, it quickly turned to hatred. The people of the land began to mock and taunt the Jews, thus discouraging Israel from doing the work that God had commanded. These so-called "friends" even used legal means to undermine Israel's authority and right to build, for they obtained from Artaxerxes, the king, a decree to stop the rebuilding of the Temple in view of the rebellious history of the Jews. The work was stopped for a period of six years and the Temple lay with only its foundations completed, overrun with weeds and grass (4:24). It was during this period that, according to the prophet Haggai, the people turned instead to building their own homes with many luxuries and comforts. Those who attempt a return to fellowship with God may often find that the record of their past rises again to haunt them and impede their progress, but a determination to go on with God would overcome even this handicap.

To aid the people, God sent two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, who proved to be God's instruments to turn the people back to their work (5:1). God also moved the heart of Darius the king to search for the original edict of Cyrus which allowed the restoration of the Temple. When it was found a decree was sent to Israel to permit the rebuilding to continue.

At last the work was finished, and in chapter 6 we read of the celebration of the Passover, marking the beginning of their new life under God. Since the Passover pictures the conversion of a Christian, it is clear from this that our new birth will never be a source of delight to us until we are restored in the temple of our spirit to fellowship with the living God. Unless we are enjoying the glory and the light of heaven upon our hearts we have nothing for which to give thanks, nothing to celebrate.



*What is the difference between the temples of Solomon, Hezekiah, Zerubbabel and Herod? Originally, Israel did not have a temple. Instead, they had a tent (called the tabernacle in some versions of the Bible) which was the centre of their worship and the place where God was said to dwell (Exodus 25:8-9<sup>L</sup>). King David wanted to build a temple but God said that his son Solomon would build it instead (1 Chronicles 17:4,11-12). Solomon's temple was begun in 966 BC (1 Kings 6:1<sup>L</sup>) and was used for nearly 400 years until it was destroyed by*

*Nebuchadnezzar's army in 586 BC (2 Kings 25:1-12). Hezekiah used this temple as he was king from about 729 BC to 686 BC. When the Jews returned from captivity, they built a new temple under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Jeshua (Ezra 3:8-11) starting in 536 BC and finishing in 520 BC (Ezra 6:15). This temple was on the same site as Solomon's temple and was in use until about 20 BC. After he came to power, King Herod wanted to build a magnificent temple in Jerusalem, partly to win the favour of his Jewish subjects. He initiated the building in about 20BC. This was built on the same site as the previous two temples, but was much larger, with enormous open paved areas known as the temple courts. The temple mentioned in the gospels and Acts (e.g., John 2:14-17; Mark 15:38; Acts 2:46; etc) is Herod's temple. It was destroyed in AD 70 by the Romans.*



*Herod's Temple*

### **Laying the Foundations of Jerusalem Temple by Zerubbabel**

Third chapter of Ezra book tells us how after the return from Babylon the Jews led by Zerubbabel and Joshua built an altar and restored the sacrifice to God Yahweh. After celebration of religious holidays they began to rebuild the temple.

First, they brought wood from Lebanon according to the order of King Cyrus. The priests began construction of the temple and laid its foundations. After laying the foundations the priests and Levites with trumpets and cymbals began to praise the Lord and to thank him for establishing the foundations of the temple. There were also the people who have seen the previous temple of Solomon by their own eyes. They wept for joy and someone just loudly rejoiced. This noise has been heard by Samaritans who wanted to participate in the reconstruction of the temple. But Zerubbabel refused them. Consequently, Samaritans began to interfere with the Jews to build the temple and its rebuilding has been delayed from the reign of King Cyrus until the reign of King Darius.

### **Premature celebration**

In the plot line of this story about laying the foundations of the temple there is a confusing thing. For what did the Jews celebrate so joyfully with trumpets and cymbals? For what did they so grateful to God? What did the elders compare with the previous Solomon Temple? According to the storyline of Ezra book, they merely laid the foundation but rejoiced as if the temple has already been built.

The book of Haggai the prophet could offer the answer to this question. It contains a very similar story. In this book, God gave orders to the Jews to rebuild their temple in Jerusalem. Residents of Judea with his governor Zerubbabel restored the temple for few weeks. Then God told them:

*Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing? (Haggai 2:3 NRSV)*

According to the story of Haggai book the Jews rebuilt the temple. Then the Lord has asked those who had seen the previous temple, compare the new temple with old. The new temple was much smaller and more modest. But God promised the Jews that the glory of this second temple will be even greater than the glory of previous one.

The story of Ezra book with elders comparing the new temple with previous one has been taken directly from the Book of Haggai the prophet. But there was no temple yet in the book of Ezra. What did they look on? They only laid the foundations.

## Evidence of 1 Esdras

1 Esdras will help us for this. In the appropriate place, where the canonical book tells us about laying the foundations of the temple, 1 Esdras tells (1 Esdras 5:57-65 NRSV):

*And they laid the foundation of the temple of God on the new moon of the second month in the second year after they came to Judea and Jerusalem.*

*They appointed the Levites who were twenty or more years of age to have charge of the work of the Lord. And Jeshua arose, and his sons and kindred and his brother Kadmiel and the sons of Jeshua Emadabun and the sons of Joda son of Iliadun, with their sons and kindred, all the Levites, pressing forward the work on the house of God with a single purpose.*

***So the builders built the temple of the Lord.***

*And the priests stood arrayed in their vestments, with musical instruments and trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, praising the Lord and blessing him, according to the directions of King David of Israel; they sang hymns, giving thanks to the Lord, "For his goodness and his glory are forever upon all Israel."*

*And all the people sounded trumpets and shouted with a great shout, praising the Lord **for the erection of the house of the Lord.***

*Some of the levitical priests and heads of ancestral houses, old men who had seen the former house, **came to the building of this one** with outcries and loud weeping, while many came with trumpets and a joyful noise, so that the people could not hear the trumpets because of the weeping of the people.*

The storyline of laying the foundations of the temple in 1 Esdras is:

1. Jews laid the foundations of the temple.
2. Priests and Levites began construction.
3. They built the temple.
4. People began to celebrate the completion of construction.
5. Elders who had seen the previous temple wept for joy in contemplation of a new temple.

The storyline of 1 Esdras is a natural and logical. It is likely that in this book preserved the original form of story about laying the foundations of the temple.



In the canonical book rebuilding the temple has been replaced on an interim action - the establishment of the temple (the laying of the foundations).

### **Continuation of the story**

Once, the story about laying the foundations of the temple already contained a description of completion the construction and its celebration. But in our book of Ezra the story of building the temple is not finished. Unknown enemies constantly interfered completion, there were new challenges, there were passed new solutions. Why?

During creation of Ezra book the unknown biblical authors had attempted to bring together various stories, tales and legends on the return from captivity and restoration of Jerusalem temple. So they combined different independent stories in one continuous storyline. If original independent stories did not contain obvious contradictions, they have been combined together by creation transitions from one story to another. If the stories contained explicit contradictions and they could not exist together, the biblical authors and editors had to make corrections, to alter or delete parts of independent stories. As a result, there has been formed continuous storyline.

### **Shifting the stories**

In both books the laying of the foundations of the temple occurred in the second year after returning from captivity. In canonical Book of Ezra this events took place at the times of King Cyrus, but in apocryphal 1 Esdras the events took place at the times of King Darius. Accordingly, in the Book of Ezra the laying of the temple foundations took place in the second year of Cyrus, and in 1 Esdras - in the second year of Darius. What date is primary?

We cannot answer definitely. But one should note that the story on the laying of the temple foundations follows the narrative of the Book of Haggai. In this book rebuilding of the temple occurred in the second year of King Darius. Therefore we can assume that in our story the primary date is the times of Darius. Another argument in favor of this assumption is that at the start of rebuilding of the temple the Jews got the cedar trees from Lebanon by order of King Cyrus. But in our canonical Book of Ezra there is no mention of this order. However, it is contained in 1 Esdras. And it is not an order of King Cyrus, but King Darius.

However, the more likely that shifting the stories has been carried in the opposite direction from the times of Cyrus to the times of Darius. This is evidenced by the text of the story. Whatever it was, already at an early stage of

the Books of Ezra the stories associated with the return from exile and rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem have been reworked. Events since the times of one king have been shifted to the times of another king. Why?

Possible answer is that historical knowledge of some authors of the book was substantially different from historical knowledge of other authors.

### **Darius the Mede**

In the prophecies on the end of Babylonian captivity and return from exile has been prophesied future fall of Babylon. It has been prophesied that Babylonian captivity would last 70 years, and after this time the Lord will do judgment upon Babylon, and he will be destroyed. This coming fall of Babylon has been perceived as God's punishment, and the man, who will destroy it, will be God's agent.

Babylon really fell, and Babylon kingdom ceased to exist. But over 49 years, not 70. However, all biblical authors really believed that the Babylonian captivity lasted 70 years, and the fall of Babylon took place 70 years after the destruction of Jerusalem temple. Greek historians told that the Babylon kingdom fell at the hands of the Persian king Cyrus the Great. Accordingly, the authors of biblical books considered him an agent of God Yahweh in the punishment of Babylon. In the Book of Isaiah the Persian king Cyrus even has been named God's anointed (Messiah). And as God's anointed he authorized the Jews to return and rebuild the destroyed Jerusalem Temple.

However, not all authors of biblical books shared this view. By the analysis of the Book of Daniel we can assume that the authors of this book really thought that Babylon kingdom fell at the hands of the Medes, but not Persians. In the book of Jeremiah also it has been predicted that Median kings will destroy Babylon. It is difficult to say what was the data of authors of Daniel book - the prophecies of Jeremiah, or some additional data - but they really believed that Babylon fell at the hands of the Median king. In the Book of Daniel this king has even been named - Darius the Mede, the son of Ahasuerus. It has been believed that this mythical king ruled the mythical united Median-Persian kingdom before the Persian king Cyrus, and the capital of this mythical united kingdom was city Ecbatana in Media. Exactly for some biblical authors Darius the Mede was a main hero. Because he destroyed Babylon, he was an agent of God Yahweh, he was anointed. And he gave permission to the Jews to return from exile, he gave the order to rebuild the Jerusalem temple.

In the guards story (story of Zerubbabel origin in 1 Esdras) King Darius - who figures in the guards story, who reigned over the Medes and Persia, who gave permission to the Jews to return, handed on the temple vessels, who wrote letters to satraps in order to help the Jews in building of Jerusalem Temple - is not the Persian king Darius I Hystaspes. He is a mythical Darius the Mede who allegedly destroyed Babylon. Reworking of stories about the return from captivity, in which events from the times of one king have been shifted to the times of another king, has been made by authors who thought that Darius the Mede was original agent of God Yahweh.

But shifting the events from the times of one king to the times of another one took place only in some manuscripts. In other manuscripts the previous version had preserved. As a result, already at an early stage of the Ezra book there were two versions of events. In one of them rebuilding the temple by Zerubbabel took place at the times of Cyrus, in another - at the times of Darius. These different versions of events had caused developing of Ezra book in two editions. One of these editions became the basis for the canonical Book of Ezra. Another edition became the basis for 1 Esdras, which largely underestimated today.

## **EZRA**

Chapters 7-10 concern the ministry of Ezra the priest. He too led a band of captives back to Jerusalem, though the exact dates are difficult to determine. It is said of him that "he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses, which the Lord God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all he requested because the hand of the Lord his God was upon him" (7:6). What kind of a man is this whom a Gentile king regards so highly that he will give Ezra anything he asks? The secret is given in 7:10, "For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel." He was not only a Bible reader; he was also a Bible doer. As a result, Ezra could ask anything of the king and it would be granted.

Ezra's specific assignment by Artaxerxes the king was "to adorn the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem" (7:27). To achieve this Ezra gathered a great company about him, taking special care to include among them a company of Levites. After prayer and fasting they set out on their journey, committing themselves to the overruling providence of God to keep them safe on their way. In due time they arrived in Jerusalem and there Ezra found an incredible condition. The Jews and the Levites had again begun to marry with their ancient enemies, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians and the Amorites.



Centuries before, God had given specific orders that the Israelites were not to intermingle with these tribes. Now they were starting the whole wretched mess over again. It was this intermarrying which had broken the strength of the nation before. It had undermined the power of God among them and finally divided the people, broken up the tribes and separated them into two nations. At last, as they succumbed to the idolatrous practices of those whom they had married, God delivered them into the hands of their captives. Now it appears that after 70 years of captivity they had not learned a thing. This is a vivid reminder that the flesh within us never changes. No matter how long we may walk in the Spirit, we will never arrive at a place where we cannot revert to the worst we have ever been, if we depart from dependence upon the Spirit of God.

When Ezra heard that the people had disobeyed God in intermarrying he tore his garments, pulled the hair from his head and beard, and sat appalled until the evening sacrifice. It was unbelievable to him. But as the book nears its close Ezra prayed to God and confessed this great sin of the people. In graciousness God moved the hearts of the people and the leaders came in brokenhearted contrition to Ezra and acknowledged their wrong. A great proclamation was issued and the people assembled together. It happened to be a day when it was raining, but despite the rain the people stood, thousands of them, in front of the Temple and confessed their guilt and agreed to put away the wives and children they had acquired outside the will of God (10:9-17).

This was not an easy thing to do, but it is surely what Jesus meant when He said, "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children...he cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:26). It does not mean that a man must put away his wife today, for this is symbolic teaching. It means that we are to put away whatever comes from the flesh (which is always pictured by the Canaanite tribes).

The book closes with a listing of the men in Israel who were faithful to the Word of God, and obeyed Him in this painful matter. Thus the work of Ezra was completed and the task to which he had been assigned, that of beautifying the Temple, went forward. So it is also in the parable of our lives.

## **NEHEMIAH**

As the book of Ezra recounts the building of the Temple, so the book of Nehemiah gives us the story of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. This is a significant order, for always the way back to God after a period of declension and captivity to evil must begin within the human spirit--the temple of man. But the next step is to begin a reconstruction of the walls, since walls are universally

the symbol of strength and protection. This is a clear picture of the process of rebuilding the defences of the spiritual life to protect against the attacks of any enemy. Many human derelicts drift up and down the streets of our cities, hopeless and helpless, because their defences have crumbled away; but frequently God in grace reaches them, against all the expectations of those who have known them, and their walls of defence are rebuilt again. This is the story of the book of Nehemiah.

## **REBUILDING THE DEFENSES**

The first step in this process is given in chapter I where a report is brought to Nehemiah in the city of Susa concerning the ruin and decay of Jerusalem. When Nehemiah heard these words he wept and mourned for several days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven (1:4). Thus the first step in rebuilding the defences of any life is to become greatly concerned about the ruins. Have you ever taken a good look at the ruins of your life? Have you ever stopped long enough to assess what you could be to God, compared to what you are? Have you looked at the possibilities that God gave you and seen how far you have deviated from that potential? If you have, then like Nehemiah, you have received word in some form or other of the desolation and ruin that is present. If you will begin to be concerned and weep over those ruins, you will have begun the process of rebuilding.

This mourning is immediately followed by confession (1:5-9). Nehemiah prays a great prayer in which he acknowledges the sin of his people and the justice of God in having fourfold the words of Moses, given in warning centuries before. Also in Moses' words, recorded in Deuteronomy, was the promise that when anyone, even in a distant country, would begin to pray to God, a recovery and restitution to the place of blessing would begin.

The prayer of confession is followed by a great commitment (1:10, 11). Nehemiah asked for divine success to be given him, for a plan is already forming in his mind even while he has been in prayer. He has something definite which he wants to ask and he prays that God will grant him mercy in the sight of the king.

Here is a man who, out of his concern and after the confession of his heart, commits himself to a project. Invariably in an enterprise like this there are factors over which man has no control and God must arrange them. So Nehemiah prays about his appearance before the king.

When, in his work as cupbearer, he comes before the king (2:4-8), his face shows concern over the city of his fathers. At the king's request he makes known to him what is troubling him. The account especially notes that the queen was sitting beside the king. Our Bible scholar has identified the king as Ahasuerus who appears also in the book of Esther. If this is the case the queen here is Esther herself. The names Artaxerxes and Ahasuerus are not proper names but are really titles meaning the great king (Artaxerxes) and the venerable father (Ahasuerus). If Esther is the queen then it would explain why the king in Nehemiah is willing to restore Jerusalem; for Queen Esther is also a Jewess.

The next need in rebuilding the defences of a city, or of a life, is that of courage to face the opposition that immediately arises. Encouraged by the king, Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem (2:8) where he found certain Canaanite leaders who were greatly displeased that someone had come to seek the welfare of the children of Israel. Whenever a man like Nehemiah says "I will arise and build," Satan always says, "Then I will arise and oppose."

Such opposition requires not only courage but caution. Nehemiah rode out around the city of Jerusalem by night (2:15), surveying the ruin that was there and taking careful note of what needed to be done. He made an honest survey of the facts and then began to lay his plans. There was no public announcement of what he intended to do, for that would have stirred up even further opposition. But without conceit or ostentation he began his work.

## **PRINCIPLES OF RECONSTRUCTION**

If the walls of your life are broken down or your defences have crumbled so that the enemy is getting at you on every hand, and you easily fall prey to temptation, it would be well to pay special heed to the principles of reconstruction set forth in chapter 3 of this book. We learn, first of all, that the people were willing to work. Second, that they became personally involved and began right where they were. Each began to work on the part of the wall that was nearest to his own house, and so called forth the deepest of personal involvement on his part.

It is noteworthy that the reconstruction of the walls centered about the 10 gates of the city. Again, in one of the marvelous hidden revelations of truth which is frequently found in Scripture, the names of these 10 gates, in the order in which they appear, is most instructive.

First, there is the Sheep Gate (3:1). Through this gate the sacrificial animals were brought into the city to be offered on the altar. This clearly pictures the

Lamb of God, whose blood was shed on the cross for us, and therefore stands for the principle of the cross. That is always the starting place to regain strength in your life. You must recognize anew that the work of the cross is to cancel out your selfish ego and put to death that which is for your own glory and advancement.

The account then moves to the Fish Gate (3:3). When we remember that Jesus said to His disciples, "Follow Me, and I will make you to become fishers of men" (Mark 1 :17), this gate suggests the witness of a Christian. Every Christian is called to be a witness. If you can never give an account of what the Lord has done for you, then this wall is broken and the Fish Gate needs to be rebuilt.

In verse 6 the Old Gate (3:6) represents the unchangeable truth of God upon which everything new must rest. As someone has well said, "Whatever is true is not new and whatever is new is not true. " In many places today the old truth is being forsaken, but if you allow this old truth to go you will find that the wall crumbles and enemies outside gain access to your soul.

The next gate is the Valley Gate (3:13). This suggests the place of humility, the place of lowliness of mind and humbleness of heart. On almost every page of Scripture God speaks against the pride of man. He looks always for the lowly, the humble, the contrite and those who have learned that they are not indispensable. This gate seems to be frequently in need of repair with many of us. But we need to be reminded that "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (James. 4:6).

Next in order is the Dung Gate (3:14). This is not a very beautiful name but it represents an essential process in life: you need to eliminate that which is corrupt and defiling. No life can be strong or healthy that does not have an often used elimination gate within it.

The Fountain Gate is mentioned next (3:15). This name reminds us instantly of the words of Jesus to the woman at the well: "The water that I shall give [you] shall become in [you] a well of water [a fountain] springing up to eternal life" (John 4:14). This speaks of the Holy Spirit who is to be like a river of life in you, enabling you to obey God's will and His Word. To drink from that flowing fountain is to be refreshed in spirit, and to find power to do what God requires.

The Fountain Gate is followed by the Water Gate (3:25,26). Water is always, in Scripture, the symbol of the Word of God. The interesting thing about this Water Gate is that it did not need to be repaired. Evidently it was the only part of the wall that was still standing. The people who lived near it are mentioned, but

nothing is said about its repair. Thus the Word of God never breaks down nor does it need repair, it simply needs to be reinhabited.

The eighth gate is the East Gate facing the rising sun (3:29). This is, therefore, the gate of hope, anticipating that which is yet to come when the trials of life and the struggles of earth end, and the glorious new sun rises on the day of God. This gate needs to be rebuilt in many of us who fall under the pessimistic spirit of this age and are crushed by the hopelessness of our times.

The ninth gate is the Horse Gate (3:28). The horse in Scripture is the symbol of warfare, that is, the need to do battle against the forces of darkness. It too is often in need of repair. As the apostle Paul says, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world-forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness" (Ephesians. 6:12).

The final gate is the Muster Gate (Nehemiah. 3:31). The Hebrew word means literally "the examination" gate. This is evidently the place where judgment was conducted, and speaks of our need to take a good look at ourselves now and then and evaluate what we are doing.

That brings us around again to the Sheep Gate (3:32), the gate of the cross. The cross must be at the beginning and end of every life.

## **PRAY AND WATCH**

The derision and scorn of their Canaanite neighbours continued to mount, and threats were made against the lives of Nehemiah and other leaders. In response, Nehemiah did two important things: He went to prayer, and set up a guard. From then on, the workers laboured with their weapons beside them, keeping watch and building at the same time (4:16). It was a practical demonstration of, "Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition."

Seeing his persistence, his enemies tried various approaches to stop the work. Nehemiah retained a single eye to the work to which God had called him. The end result was the finishing of the wall and the gaining of the respect of surrounding nations when they saw the hand of God at work.

When the walls were completed the people were encouraged to move back from the suburbs to homes within the city walls (chap. 7). The register of peoples is almost identical to the list in Ezra, which lends confirmation to the theory that it was Nehemiah who first returned from Babylon and Ezra who came later. This

also is strengthened by the fact that it is only at this point in Nehemiah that Ezra appears in the book.

When the walls were completed, the time came to reaffirm the spiritual strength of the nation. In a great gathering of the people, the Law was read to them anew, accompanied by exposition given by Ezra the priest (chap. 8). It is especially significant that when the people were convicted by the reading of the Law to the point of weeping, Ezra and Nehemiah comforted them with reassurances that the Lord Himself had made provision for their forgiveness, and that "the joy of the Lord is your strength" (8:10).

Chapters 11 through 13 conclude the book, with first a recognition of certain gifts among the people. Levites, gatekeepers, singers and various other ministries were recognized. This is similar to the New Testament which sets the church to discover the gifts of the Spirit that are given among them, and put them all to work. In chapter 12 is the story of the dedication of the wall. The people gathered and marched around the wall with instruments, singing and shouting, playing and rejoicing.

During the reading of the Law, it was learned again that the people of God should give no official place to either an Ammonite or a Moabite. Nehemiah, who had gone back to Persia and apparently had returned for the dedication of the walls, reminded the high priest that Tobiah was an Ammonite and had been given a place to live within the very Temple itself. This is the Tobiah who had done so much to hinder the work of building the wall. To correct this, Nehemiah went in and threw Tobiah's furniture out into the street. Further, he found that the priests and Levites had been cheated, so he restored the money that belonged to them. Then discovering that the people were violating the Sabbath, he commanded that the doors of the city should be shut when the Sabbath began and kept shut until it was ended. Finally, he dealt with some violence with the problem of intermarrying with forbidden races again. When he learned that one of the priests was the son-in-law of Sanballat, who had done so much to oppose Nehemiah's work, he chased the young man from his presence.

To us it may appear that Nehemiah was overly severe with these violations, but here is a man who has learned that there can be no compromise with evil. He manifests one of the greatest lessons the Spirit of God can ever teach us: to say no when it needs to be said and to say it with firmness and determination. Those who have made a mark for God throughout the history of the church have been those who have learned to say no at the right times.

Thus the book of Nehemiah has given itself to a clear demonstration of how to rebuild the walls of strength in our individual lives, and to maintain those walls in strength by unceasing resistance to allurements and attacks which attempt to force us to compromise. How important it is to be ruthless against the forces that undermine and sap the vitality of our lives in Christ.

## **ESTHER**

There is no internal or external evidence as to who was the author of the book of Esther, and little indication of its date.

The book of Esther is an historical incident that occurred during the days of Jewish captivity in Babylon. Some Bible scholars feel that the Persian king, Ahasuerus in the book, is Xerxes the Great. one great Bible scholar, however, identifies him with Astyages--also called Artaxerxes in Nehemiah and Ezra, the father of Cyrus the Persian.

Esther doesn't appear to be a religious book because nowhere does the name of God appear--nor any mention of heaven or hell. However, the name Jehovah does appear four times in the original Hebrew in a hidden way: in the form of acrostics. It is interesting to note that Jehovah declared in Deuteronomy 31 that if His people forsook Him He would hide His face from them.

As in our study of other Old Testament events, the greatest lesson in the account of Esther is in its spiritual parallel to man himself. This pattern appears in the Tabernacle, is repeated in the Temple, appears in the three-fold division of the nation Israel and now is the key to the book of Esther.

Ahasuerus, the king, depicts the soul of man, comprising mind, emotions and, especially, will. His capital city, Susa, is the body in which all his decisions and actions will be most immediately felt. His empire is the sphere of influence which each one of us exerts on all whom we contact. His queen is the spirit of man, closely bound to the soul in such a way that no division or separation can be felt. The queen, bound in marriage to the king, depicts the place of fellowship, refreshment and communion with God which is intimately related to our soul.

Ahasuerus's empire was in a time of peace and blessing, fullness and fruitfulness. No enemy threatened his kingdom from the outside; there was nothing to do but display the lavish glory of his kingdom. Unfallen Adam in parallel, was just such a king. His whole empire, the Garden of Eden, lay at rest and he was free to do nothing more than manifest the riches, fruitfulness and glory of his kingdom while enjoying unhindered communion with God.

During a six-month long feast, which began in joy and merrymaking but ended in tragedy, the king was lifted up in pride and sought to disgrace his queen. Her refusal to submit to his demands resulted in her being deposed from the throne. This decree became a law which could not be changed. When Adam chose to assert the desire of his will over what he knew in his heart that God wanted, he laid the groundwork for the eventual fall of the entire race. His disobedience caused him and all his descendants to enter a fallen state, losing communion with God, which they were helpless to change.

In his loneliness, Ahasuerus sought a new queen. Esther one of the Jewish captives, who was under the control of her cousin Mordecai, was chosen and was exalted to second place in the kingdom. In the spiritual parallel of our life, fallen man, in loneliness and restlessness, also searches for a new place of communion and fellowship with God, even though he himself hardly knows what he is looking for. The new queen depicts our moment of conversion. At this moment we receive a new spirit who, though we do not yet understand it, is under control of another--the Holy Spirit. Throughout this book, "the little man," Mordecai, is the power behind the throne, thus depicting the humility and self-effacement of the Spirit of Christ.

When Haman, a descendant of Amalek--who always pictures the aspects of the flesh--convinced Ahasuerus to decree that the Jews should be destroyed, Esther risked her life to save her people. She told the king that his decree would mean her death as well as her people's death. The king, in consternation, had Haman hanged; Mordecai is exalted to a place of power and instantly everything begins to change. Another decree by the king removed the threat of death from the Jewish captives and allowed them to kill their enemies, just as in Romans 8:2 Paul tells us that "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death."

The book ends with the establishment of the feast of Purim as an enduring memorial to the events of this story. There is a tradition among the Jews that the feast of Purim is the only feast that will be observed after the Messiah comes. This reflects the truth that to walk in the Spirit is normal for both time and eternity. It is the greatest lesson which God wants us to learn.

In this book we have the same king and the same kingdom at the end as we do at the beginning. The only difference is that Haman is out and Mordecai is in. But what a difference! Just as the king and kingdom remain the same, so the Christian remains the same person when the Spirit is given the place of control in his life. Personality does not change, but it is cleansed and enhanced by the presence of the Spirit. So Paul can say, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it



is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians. 2:20). The person remains the same; the principle upon which he lives and acts is entirely different. That is the secret of the Spirit-filled life. As Mordecai, through the will of the king, brings power and peace to the kingdom, so the Holy Spirit, through our human will and never beyond it, brings peace and prosperity into our lives.



*General view with the Temple destroyed and rebuild*

## **Bible Timeline, Persian Kings Period**

**607 Captivity** begins time of Jehoiakim (Daniel 1:1-6; 2 Chronicles 36:6-7)

**597 Deportation**, Time of Jehoiachin (Jeremiah 52:28-30)

**586 Babylon invasion**, FALL OF JERUSALEM, TEMPLE Destroyed

**559-530 Persian King**, Cyrus II,

**538 Babylon** surrenders to Persian King Cyrus

**537 Daniel prospers** under King Cyrus, Daniel 6:28

**537 First exiles** return from 70 years Captivity.

**535 Altar and Foundation of the TEMPLE begun, Zerubbabel**

**530-522 Persian King Cambyses**

**522-486 BC Persian King Darius I**

**522 Temple construction stopped** by opposition

**520 Prophet Zechariah**

**520 Prophet Haggai**

**520 Rebuilding of Temple Resumed**

**516 Temple Finished and Dedicated**

**486-465 Persian King Xerxes I**

**473 Esther is Queen of Persia**

**465-425 Persian King Artaxerxes**

**458 Second exile group returns to Jerusalem**, 90 years since first group

Ezra in this return, He reforms Synagogues and Scribes founded

**445 Third exile group returns**

Nehemiah Rebuilds the Walls of Jerusalem Nehemiah

**440 Book of Ezra** written

**433 Nehemiah returns and institutes Reforms**

Prophet Malachi

**430 Book of Nehemiah** written

**430 Book of Malachi** written

## **OLD TESTAMENT HISTORY ENDS WITH THE BOOK OF Malachi**

400 years Inter-Testamental period begins (inter-testamental period)

### **The Inter-Testamental Period**

The time between the last writings of the Old Testament and the appearance of Christ is known as the “intertestamental” (or “between the testaments”) period. Because there was no prophetic word from God during this period, some refer to it as the “400 silent years.” The political, religious, and social atmosphere of Palestine changed significantly during this period. Much of what happened was predicted by the prophet Daniel. (See Daniel chapters 2, 7, 8, and 11 and compare to historical events.)

Israel was under the control of the Persian Empire from about 532-332 B.C. The Persians allowed the Jews to practice their religion with little interference. They were even allowed to rebuild and worship at the temple (2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4). This period included the last 100 years of the Old Testament period and about the first 100 years of the inter-testamental period. This time of relative peace and contentment was just the calm before the storm.

Alexander the Great defeated Darius of Persia, bringing Greek rule to the world. Alexander was a student of Aristotle and was well educated in Greek philosophy and politics. He required that Greek culture be promoted in every land that he conquered. As a result, the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek, becoming the translation known as the Septuagint. Most of the New Testament references to Old Testament Scripture use the Septuagint phrasing. Alexander did allow religious freedom for the Jews, though he still strongly promoted Greek lifestyles. This was not a good turn of events for Israel since the Greek culture was very worldly, humanistic, and ungodly.

After Alexander died, Judea was ruled by a series of successors, culminating in Antiochus Epiphanes. Antiochus did far more than refuse religious freedom to the Jews. Around 167 B.C., he overthrew the rightful line of the priesthood and desecrated the temple, defiling it with unclean animals and a pagan altar (see Mark 13:14). This was the religious equivalent of rape. Eventually, Jewish resistance to Antiochus restored the rightful priests and rescued the temple. The period that followed was one of war, violence, and infighting.

Around 63 B.C., Pompey of Rome conquered Palestine, putting all of Judea under control of the Caesars. This eventually led to Herod being made king of Judea by the Roman emperor and senate. This would be the nation that taxed and controlled the Jews, and eventually executed the Messiah on a Roman cross.

Roman, Greek, and Hebrew cultures were now mixed together in Judea.

During the span of the Greek and Roman occupations, two important political/religious groups emerged in Palestine. The Pharisees added to the Law of Moses through oral tradition and eventually considered their own laws more important than God's (see Mark 7:1-23). While Christ's teachings often agreed with the Pharisees, He railed against their hollow legalism and lack of compassion. The Sadducees represented the aristocrats and the wealthy. The Sadducees, who wielded power through the Sanhedrin, rejected all but the Mosaic books of the Old Testament. They refused to believe in resurrection and were generally shadows of the Greeks, whom they greatly admired.

This rush of events that set the stage for Christ had a profound impact on the Jewish people. Both Jews and pagans from other nations were becoming dissatisfied with religion. The pagans were beginning to question the validity of polytheism. Romans and Greeks were drawn from their mythologies towards Hebrew Scriptures, now easily readable in Greek or Latin. The Jews, however, were despondent. Once again, they were conquered, oppressed, and polluted. Hope was running low; faith was even lower. They were convinced that now the only thing that could save them and their faith was the appearance of the Messiah.

The New Testament tells the story of how hope came, not only for the Jews, but for the entire world. Christ's fulfilment of prophecy was anticipated and recognized by many who sought Him out. The stories of the Roman centurion, the wise men, and the Pharisee Nicodemus show how Jesus was recognized as the Messiah by those who lived in His day. The "400 years of silence" were broken by the greatest story ever told—the gospel of Jesus Christ!

## **Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther Theology**

Most Christians don't find their environment very supportive of their faith. Generally, there is limited scope for explicitly Christian witness and action. Moreover, people may feel pressure to violate the ethical requirements of biblical standards, either explicitly or implicitly. In a pluralistic society, some such limits may be appropriate, but they can make the workplace feel like alien territory to Christians. The books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther depict what it is like for God's people to work in unwelcoming secularized world. They show God's people working in jobs ranging from construction to politics to entertainment, always in the midst of environments openly hostile to God's values and plans. Yet along the way they receive surprising help from nonbelievers in the highest positions of civic power. God's power seems

to crop up for his people's good in surprising places, yet they face extremely challenging situations and decisions, upon which they don't always agree.

Ezra had to ponder whether to trust an unbelieving ruler to protect the Jewish people as they returned to Jerusalem and began rebuilding the temple. He had to find financial support within the corrupt economic system of the Persian Empire, yet to be true to God's laws about economic integrity. Nehemiah had to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, which required him to both trust God and be pragmatic. He had to lead people whose motivation ranged from altruism to greed, and get them to overcome their divergent self-interests to work towards a common purpose. Esther had to survive both the oppression of women and the deadly intrigue within the Persian royal court, yet remain ready to risk everything to save her people from genocide. Our times and institutions have changed since their days, but in many ways our world today has much in common, for better or worse, with the places where Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther laboured. The real life situations, challenges and choices found in these biblical books help us develop a theology of work that matters in how we live each day.

## **Theology of Ezra and Nehemiah**

In 587 BC, the Babylonians, under the rule of King Nebuchadnezzar, conquered Jerusalem. They killed the leaders of Judah, plundered the temple before burning it to the ground, destroyed much of the city, including its walls, and took the cream of Jerusalem's crop of citizens to Babylon. There, these Jews lived for decades in exile, always hoping for God's deliverance and the restoration of Israel. Their hopes were heightened in 539 BC when Persia, led by King Cyrus, overthrew Babylon. Shortly thereafter, Cyrus issued a decree inviting the Jews in his kingdom to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple and, therefore, their life as God's people (Ezra 1:1-4).

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah, originally two parts of a single work, narrate crucial aspects of this rebuilding story, beginning with the edict of Cyrus in 539 BC. Their purpose, however, is not simply to describe what happened long ago out of antiquarian curiosity. Rather, Ezra and Nehemiah use historical events to illustrate the theme of restoration. These books show how God once restored his people and how people played a central role in this work of renewal. Ezra and Nehemiah were written by an unknown author, probably in the fourth-century BC, to encourage the Jewish people to live faithfully even under foreign rule, so that they might be participants in God's present and future work of restoration.

Ezra and Nehemiah are highly theological books, but they do not directly address the theology of *daily living today*. They do not include legal imperatives or prophetic visions having to do with our daily labors. The narratives of Ezra and Nehemiah do describe arduous work, however, implicitly placing work in a theological framework. Thus we'll find beneath the surface of these books rich soil from which a theology of work might sprout. In particular, Ezra and Nehemiah were called to restore God's kingdom (Israel), in the midst of a partially-hostile, partially-supportive environment. Today's world is also partially hostile and partially supportive of the work of God. This encourages us to work out how our work may contribute to implanting God's kingdom in today's world

## **ESTHER**

The Book of Esther tells the story of one curious episode during the era depicted in Ezra and Nehemiah. It focuses, not on the restoration of Jerusalem, but rather on events happening in Persia when Ahasuerus, better known to us by his Greek name, Xerxes, was king (485-465 BC). The narrative of Esther accounts for the origins of the Jewish festival of Purim. The unidentified author of this book wrote, in part, to explain and encourage celebration of this national holiday (see Esther 9:20-28).

His broader concern was to examine how Jews could survive and even thrive as exiles in a pagan and often hostile land.

In contrast to Ezra and Nehemiah, Esther is not explicitly theological at all. In fact, God is never mentioned. Yet no faithful reader could fail to see the hand of God behind the events of the book. This invites the reader to ponder how God may be at work in the world unnoticed by those without eyes to see.

The Book of Ezra begins with a decree from King Cyrus of Persia, allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple that had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC (Ezra 1:2-4). The introduction to this decree specifies when it was proclaimed: "In the first year of King Cyrus" (539-538 BC, shortly after the Persian defeat of Babylon). It also introduces us to one of the principal themes of Ezra-Nehemiah: the relationship between God's work and human work. Cyrus made his proclamation "that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished," and because "the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus" (Ezra 1:1). Cyrus was doing his work as king, seeking his personal and institutional ends. Yet this was a result of God's work within him, advancing God's own purposes. We sense in the first verse of Ezra that God is

in control, yet choosing to work through human beings, even Gentile kings, to accomplish his will.

Christians today also live in trust that God is active through the decisions and actions of non-Christian people and institutions. Cyrus was God's chosen instrument, whether or not Cyrus himself recognized that. Similarly, the actions of our governments, bosses, co-workers, customers and suppliers, rivals, regulators or a myriad of other actors may be furthering the work of God's kingdom unrecognized by either us or them. That should prevent us from both despair and arrogance. If Christian people and values seem absent from your environment, don't despair — God is still at work. On the other hand, if you are tempted to see yourself or your local community as a paragon of Christian virtue, beware! God may be accomplishing more through those with less visible connection to him than you realize. Certainly, God's work through Cyrus — who remained wealthy, powerful, and unbelieving, even while many of God's people were only slowly recovering from the poverty of exile — should warn us not to expect wealth and power as a necessary reward for our faithful work. God is using all things to work towards his kingdom, not necessarily towards our personal success.

God's work continued as many Jews took advantage of Cyrus' decree. "Every one whose spirit God had stirred" prepared to return to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:5). When they arrived in Jerusalem, their first job was to build the altar and offer sacrifices on it (Ezra 3:1-3). This epitomizes the chief sort of work chronicled in Ezra and Nehemiah. It is closely associated with the sacrificial practices of Old Testament Judaism, which took place in the temple. The work described in these books reflects and supports the centrality of the temple and its offerings in the life of God's people. Worship and work stride hand and hand through the pages of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Given the focus in Ezra upon the rebuilding of the temple, people's jobs are mentioned when they are relevant to this effort. Thus the list of people returning to Jerusalem specifically itemizes "the priests, the Levites... and the singers, the gatekeepers, and the temple servants" (Ezra 2:70). The text identifies "masons and carpenters" because they were necessary for the building project (Ezra 3:7). People whose skills did not equip them for working directly on the temple contributed to the task through the fruit of their work in the form of "freewill offerings" (Ezra 2:68). Thus, in a sense, the rebuilding of the temple was the work of all the people as they contributed in one way or another.

Ezra identifies political leaders in addition to Cyrus because of their impact, positive or negative, on the construction effort. For example, Zerubbabel is mentioned as a leader of the people. He was the governor of the territory who

oversaw the rebuilding of the temple (Haggai 1:1). Ezra mentions “Rehum the royal deputy and Shimshai the scribe,” officials who wrote a letter opposing the temple’s reconstruction (Ezra 4:8-10). Other kings and officials show up according to their relevance to the rebuilding project.

The temple is what the project was about, but it would be a mistake to think that God blesses craftsmanship and material work only when it is devoted to a religious purpose. Ezra’s vision was to restore the whole city of Jerusalem (Ezra 4:13), not just the temple. We will discuss this point further when we come to Nehemiah, who actually undertook the work beyond the temple.

Ezra describes several efforts to squelch the construction (Ezra 4:1-23). These were successful for a while, stopping the temple project for about two decades (Ezra 4:24). Finally, God encouraged the Jews through the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah to resume and complete the job (Ezra 5:1). Moreover, Darius, king of Persia, underwrote the building effort financially in the hope that the Lord might bless him and his sons (Ezra 6:8-10). Thus the temple was finally completed, thanks to the fact that God had “turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them” so that “he aided [the Jews] in the work on the house of God” (Ezra 6:22).

As this verse makes clear, the Jews actually did the work of rebuilding the temple. Yet their labours were successful because of help from two pagan kings, one who inaugurated the project and the other who paid for its completion. Behind these human efforts loomed the overarching work of God, who moved in the hearts of the kings and encouraged his people through the prophets. As we have seen, God is at work far beyond what meets the eye of his people.

Ironically, Ezra himself does not appear in the book bearing his name until chapter 7. This learned man, a priest and teacher of the law, came to Jerusalem with the blessing of the Persian king Artaxerxes over fifty years after the rebuilding of the temple. His assignment was to present offerings in the temple on behalf of the king and to establish the law of God in Judah, both by teaching and by appointing law-abiding leaders (Ezra 7:25-26).

Ezra did not explain the king’s favour in terms of good luck. Rather, he credited God with putting “such a thing as this into the heart of the king” to send Ezra to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:27). Ezra “took courage” and acted on the king’s order because, as he said, “the hand of the Lord my God was upon me” (Ezra 7:28). This language of God’s hand being upon someone is a favourite of Ezra, where it appears six times out of eight times in the whole Bible (Ezra 7:6, 9, 28; 8:18,



22, 31). God was at work in and through Ezra, and that explains his success in his endeavours.

Ezra's confidence in God's help was tested when it came time for his entourage to journey from Babylon to Jerusalem. "I was ashamed," Ezra explained, "to ask the king for a band of soldiers and cavalry to protect us against the enemy on our way; since we had told the king, 'The hand of our God is gracious to all who seek him, but his power and his wrath are against all who forsake him'" (Ezra 8:22). For Ezra, to depend on a royal escort implied a failure to trust in God's protection. So he and his retinue fasted and prayed rather than seek practical assistance from the king (Ezra 8:23). Note: Ezra was not following any particular Old Testament law in choosing not to receive royal protection. Rather, this decision reflected his personal convictions about what it meant to trust God in the real challenges of leadership. One might say that Ezra was an "idealistic believer" in this situation, because he was willing to stake his life on the idea of God's protection, rather than to ensure protection with human help. As we'll see later, Ezra's position was not the only one deemed reasonable by godly leaders in Ezra and Nehemiah.

Ezra's strategy proved to be successful. "The hand of our God was upon us," he observed, "and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambushes along the way." (Ezra 8:31). We do not know, however, if members of Ezra's party carried weapons or used them for protection. The text seems to suggest that Ezra and company completed their journey without a threatening incident. Once again, the book of Ezra shows that human efforts are successful when God is at work in them.

The last two chapters of Ezra focus on the problem of Jews intermarrying with Gentiles. The issue of work does not emerge here, except in the example of Ezra, who exercises his leadership in faithfulness to the Law and with prayerful decisiveness.

## **NEHEMIAH**

The first chapter of the Book of Nehemiah introduces the book bearing his name as a resident of Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire. When Nehemiah heard that the walls of Jerusalem were still broken down more than a half-century after the completion of the rebuilding of the temple, he "sat down and wept," fasting and praying before God (Neh. 1:4). Implicitly, he was formulating a plan to remedy the situation in Jerusalem.

The connection between the temple and the wall is significant for the theology of daily living. The temple might seem to be a religious institution, while the

walls are a secular one. But God led Nehemiah to work on the walls, no less than he led Ezra to work on the temple. Both the sacred and the secular were necessary to fulfil God's plan to restore the nation of Israel. If the walls were unfinished, the temple was unfinished too. The work was of a single piece. The reason for this is easy to understand. Without a wall, no city in the ancient Near East was safe from bandits, gangs and wild animals, even though the empire might be at peace. The more economically and culturally developed a city was, the greater the value of things in the city, and the greater the need for the wall. The temple, with its rich decorations, would have been particularly at risk. Practically speaking, no wall means no city, and no city means no temple.



*The Wall in Jerusalem (known as the Weaning Wall).*

Conversely, the city and its wall depend on the temple as the source of God's provision for law, government, security and prosperity. Even on strictly military terms, the temple and the wall are mutually dependent. The wall is an integral part of the city's protection, yet so is the temple wherein dwells the Lord (Ezra 1:3) who brings to nothing the violent plans of the city's enemies (Neh. 4:15). Likewise with government and justice. The gates of the wall are where lawsuits are tried (Deuteronomy 21:19, Isaiah 29:21), while at the same time the Lord

from his temple “executes justice for the orphan and the widow” (Deut. 10:18). No temple means no presence of God, and no presence of God means no military strength, no justice, no civilization and no need for walls. The temple and the walls are united in a society founded on God’s “covenant and steadfast love” (Neh. 1:5). This at least is the ideal towards which Nehemiah is fasting, praying and working. (The one that refuses to work should not eat.)

The last line of Nehemiah 1 identifies him as “cupbearer to the king” (Neh. 1:11). This means not only that he had immediate access to the king as the one who tested and served his beverages, but also that Nehemiah was a trusted advisor and high-ranking Persian official.

When the king granted him permission to oversee the rebuilding project, Nehemiah asked for letters to the governors through whose territory he would pass on his trip to Jerusalem (Neh. 2:7). In Nehemiah’s view, the king granted this request “for the gracious hand of my God was upon me” (Neh. 2:8). Apparently, Nehemiah did not believe that trusting God meant he should not seek the king’s protection for his journey. Moreover, he was pleased to have “officers of the army and cavalry” escort him safely to Jerusalem (Neh. 2:9).

The text of Nehemiah does not suggest there was anything wrong with Nehemiah’s decision to seek and accept the king’s protection. In fact, it claims that God’s blessing accounted for this bit of royal assistance. It is striking to note how different Nehemiah’s approach to this issue was from Ezra’s. Whereas Ezra believed that trusting God meant he should not ask for royal protection, Nehemiah saw the offer of such protection as evidence of God’s gracious hand of blessing. This disagreement demonstrates how easy it is for godly people to come to different conclusions about what it means to trust God in their work. Perhaps each was simply doing what he was most familiar with. Ezra was a priest, familiar with the habitation of the Lord’s presence. Nehemiah was a cupbearer to the king, familiar with the exercise of royal power. Both Ezra and Nehemiah were seeking to be faithful in their labours. Both were godly, prayerful leaders. But they understood trusting God for protection differently. For Ezra, it meant journeying without the king’s guard. For Nehemiah, it meant accepting the offer of royal help as evidence of God’s own blessing.

We find signs in several places that Nehemiah was what we could call a “pragmatic believer.” In Nehemiah 2, for example, Nehemiah secretly surveyed the rubble of the former wall before even announcing his plans to the residents of Jerusalem (Neh. 2:11-17). Apparently he wanted to know the size and scope of the work he was taking on before he publicly committed to doing it. Yet, after explaining the purpose of his coming to Jerusalem and pointing to God’s gracious hand upon him, when some local officials mocked and accused him,

Nehemiah answered, “The God of heaven is the one who will give us success” (Neh. 2:20). God would give this success, in part, through Nehemiah’s clever and well-informed leadership. The fact that success came from the Lord did not mean Nehemiah could sit back and relax. Quite to the contrary, Nehemiah was about to commence an arduous and demanding task.

His leadership involved delegation of parts of the wall-building project to a wide variety of people, including “Eliashib, the high priest, [and] his fellow-priests” (Neh. 3:1), “the Tekoites,” minus their nobles who didn’t want to submit to the supervisors (Neh. 3:5), “Uzziell the son of Harhaiah, one of the goldsmiths” and “Hananiah, one of the perfumers” (Neh. 3:8), “Shallum, ...ruler of half the district of Jerusalem, [and] his daughters” (Neh. 3:12), and many others. Nehemiah was able to inspire collegiality and to organize the project effectively.

But then, just as in the story of the rebuilding of the temple in Ezra, opposition arose. Leaders of local peoples attempted to hinder the Jewish effort through ridicule, but “the people had a mind to work” (Neh. 4:6). When their words did not stop the wall from being rebuilt, the local leaders “all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it” (Neh. 4:8).

So what did Nehemiah lead his people to do? Pray and trust God? Or arm themselves for battle? Predictably, the pragmatic believer led them to do both: “We prayed to our God, and set a guard as a protection against them day and night” (Neh. 4:9). In fact, when threats against the wall-builders mounted, Nehemiah also stationed guards at key positions. He encouraged his people not to lose heart because of their opponents: “Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and terrible, and fight for your kin, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes” (Neh. 4:14). Because of their faith, the people were to fight. Then, not long thereafter, Nehemiah added a further word of encouragement, “Our God will fight for us!” (Neh. 4:20). Yet this was not an invitation to the Jews to put down their weapons and focus on building, trusting in supernatural protection alone. Rather, God would fight for his people by assisting them in battle. He would be at work in and through his people as they worked.

We Christians sometimes seem to act as if there were a rigid wall between actively pursuing our own agenda and passively waiting for God to act. We are aware that this is a false duality, which is why, for example, orthodox/historic Christian theology rejects the Christian Science premise that medical treatments are acts of unfaithfulness to God. Yet, at moments, we are tempted to become passive while waiting for God to act. If you are unemployed, yes, God wants you to have a job. To get the job God wants you to have, you have to write a resume, conduct a search, apply for positions, interview, and get rejected dozens

of times before finding that job, just as everyone else has to do. If you are a parent, yes, God wants you to have enjoyment in raising your children. But you will still have to set and enforce limits, be available at times when it's inconvenient, discuss difficult topics with them, cry and suffer with them through bumps, broken bones, and broken hearts, do homework with them, ask their forgiveness when you are wrong, and offer them forgiveness when they fail. You don't get time off as a reward for good behaviour such as taking your kids to church. Nehemiah and company's arduous work warns us that trusting God does not equate with sitting on our hands waiting for magical solutions for our difficulties.

Nehemiah's wall-building project was threatened, not just from the outside, but also from the inside. Certain wealthy Jewish nobles and officials were taking advantage of economically difficult times to line their own pockets (Nehemiah 5). They were loaning money to fellow Jews, expecting interest to be paid on the loans, even though this was prohibited in the Jewish Law (for example, Exodus 22:25).

When the debtors couldn't repay the loans, they lost their land and were even forced to sell their children into slavery (Neh. 5:5). Nehemiah responded by demanding that the wealthy stop charging interest on loans and give back whatever they had taken from their debtors.

In contrast to the selfishness of those who had been taking advantage of their fellow Jews, Nehemiah did not use his leadership position to enhance his personal fortune. "Because of the fear of God," he even refused to tax the people to pay for his personal expenses, unlike his predecessors (Neh. 5:14-16). Instead, he generously invited many to eat at his table, paying from this expense from his personal savings without taxing the people (Neh. 5:17-18).

In a sense, the nobles and officials were guilty of the same kind of dualism we have just discussed. In their case, they were not waiting passively for God to solve their problems. Instead, they were actively pursuing their own gain as if economic life had nothing to do with God. But Nehemiah tells them that their economic lives are of utmost importance to God, because God cares about all of society, not just its religious aspects: "Should you not walk in the fear of our God, to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies [to whom the nobles had forced the sale of Jewish debtors as slaves]?" (Neh. 5:9). Nehemiah connects an economic issue (usury) with the fear of God.

The issues of Nehemiah 5, though emerging from a legal and cultural setting distant from our own, challenge us to consider how much we should profit personally from our position and privilege, even from our work. Should we put our money in banks that make loans with interest? Should we take advantage of

perks made available to us in our everyday life, even if these come at considerable cost to others? Nehemiah's specific commands (don't charge interest, don't foreclose on collateral, don't force the sale of people into slavery) may apply differently in our time, but underlying his commands is a prayer that still applies: "Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people" (Neh. 5:19). As it was to Nehemiah, God's call to today's world is to do everything we can for all people. In practice, that means we each owe God the duty of caring for the cloud of persons who depend on our work: employers, co-workers, customers, family, the public and many others. Nehemiah may not tell us exactly how to handle today's workplace situations, but he tells us how to orient our minds as we decide. Put people first.

The external and internal problems facing Nehemiah did not halt work on the wall, which was completed in only fifty-two days (Neh. 6:15). The enemies of Judah "were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem; for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God" (Neh. 6:16). Even though Nehemiah had exercised his considerable leadership to inspire and organize the builders, and even though they had worked tirelessly, and even though Nehemiah's wisdom enabled him to fend off attacks and distractions, nevertheless he saw all of this as work done with God's help. God worked through him and his people, using their gifts and labour to accomplish God's own purposes.

After the wall surrounding Jerusalem was completed, the Israelites gathered in Jerusalem in order to renew their covenant with God. Ezra reappeared at this point in order to read the Law to the people (Neh. 8:2-5). As they heard the Law, they wept (Neh. 8:9). Yet Nehemiah rebuked them for their sorrow, adding, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to him for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord" (Neh. 8:10). However central work might be to serving God, so is celebration. On holy days, people are to enjoy the fruits of their labors as well as sharing them with those who lack such delights.

Yet, as Nehemiah chapter 9 demonstrates, there was also a time for godly sorrow as the people confessed their sins to God (Neh. 9:2). Their confession came in the context of an extensive recital of all the things God had done, beginning with creation itself (Neh. 9:6) and continuing through the crucial events of the Old Testament. The failure of Israel to be faithful to the Lord explained, among other things, why God's chosen people were "slaves" to foreign kings and why those kings enjoyed the fruits of Israelite labours (Neh. 9:36-37).

Among the promises made by the people as they renewed their covenant with the Lord was a commitment to honour the Sabbath (Neh. 10:31). In particular, they promised not to do business on the Sabbath with “the peoples of the land” who worked on this day. The Israelites also promised to fulfil their responsibility to support the temple and its workers (Neh. 10:31-39). They would do so by giving to the temple and its staff a percentage of the fruit of their own work. Now, as then, the commitment to give a percentage of our income to support the “service of the house of our God” (Ezra 10:32) is both a necessary means of financing the work of worship and a reminder that everything we have comes from God’s hand.

After completing his task of building the wall in Jerusalem and overseeing the restoration of society there, Nehemiah returned to serve King Artaxerxes (Neh. 13:6). Later, he came back to Jerusalem, where he discovered that some of the reforms he had initiated were thriving, while others had been neglected. For example, he observed some people working on the Sabbath (Neh. 13:15). Jewish officials had been letting Gentile traders bring their goods into Jerusalem for sale on the day of rest (Neh. 13:16). So Nehemiah rebuked those who had failed to honor the Sabbath (Neh. 13:7-18). Moreover, in his typically pragmatic approach, he closed the city gates before the Sabbath began, keeping them shut until the day of rest had passed. He also stationed some of his servants at the gates so that they might tell potential sellers to leave (Neh. 13:19).

The question of whether and/or how Christians ought to keep the Sabbath cannot be answered from Nehemiah. A much broader theological conversation is necessary.

Nevertheless, this book reminds us of the centrality of Sabbath-keeping to God’s first covenant people and the threat posed by economic interaction with those who do not honour the Sabbath. In our own context, it was certainly easier for Christians to keep the Sabbath when the malls were closed on the Lord’s Day. However, our contemporary culture of round-the-clock commerce puts us in Nehemiah’s situation, in which a conscious — and potentially costly — decision about Sabbath-keeping is required.

## **ESTHER**

The Book of Esther begins with King Ahasuerus (known to history outside the Bible as Xerxes) throwing a lavish party to display his glory (Es. 1:1-8). Having consumed ample amounts of wine, Ahasuerus commanded his servants to bring Queen Vashti before him in order that he might show her off to the other partygoers (Es. 1:10-11). But Vashti, sensing the indignity of the request, refused (Es. 1:12). Her refusal disturbed the men in attendance, who



feared that her example would encourage other women in the kingdom to stand up to their husbands (Es. 1:13-18). Thus Vashti was “fired,” if you will, and a process was begun to find Ahasuerus a new queen (Es. 1:21-2:4). To be sure, this episode depicts a family matter. But every royal family is also a political workplace. So Vashti’s situation is also a workplace issue, in which the boss seeks to exploit a woman because of her gender and then terminates her when she fails to live up to his fantasies.

The king seeks to replace Vashti, and a young Jewish woman named Esther ends up in the harem being extensively prepared to be tried out by the king for one night (Es. 2:8-14). From our point of view, she is caught in an oppressive, sexist system and is soon to lose her virginity at the hands of a selfish tyrant. But she is not a passive victim. She plays the system to her own advantage, sleeping with the king, keeping silent about the oppression of Vashti, deceiving the king about her ethnicity (Es. 2:20). Because of Esther’s exceeding beauty, she wins the king’s favor and is crowned as the new queen (Es. 2:17). Esther’s willingness to join a royal harem and become the wife of a pagan king is even more striking, given the emphasis in both Ezra and Nehemiah on the wrongness of intermarriage between Jews and Gentiles (Ezra 9:1-4; Neh. 13:23-27). After reading Ezra’s grief-filled prayer of confession following his learning that some Jews had married Gentiles (Ezra 9:13-15), we can only wonder what he might have thought about Esther’s marriage to Ahasuerus.

The contrast between Ezra and Nehemiah’s faithful adherence to Jewish law and Esther’s religious and moral compromises could not be more starkly drawn. Esther is willing to do whatever it takes to get ahead. She is eager to take advantage of another woman’s misfortune and more than willing to submit herself to exploitation. Moral compromise – whether or not to Esther’s extent — is familiar to almost all workplace Christians. Who has never taken morally dubious action in the course of their work? Who has never kept silent when the mistreatment of another has rebounded to our own advantage — failing to stand up when the boss hides his or her own incompetence by firing a subordinate, or watching the dirtiest, most dangerous job fall once again to the ethnic outsider? Who has never shaded the truth to gain what we wanted — implying greater responsibility than we really had for a past success or pretending to know more than we really do in class or on the job?

Esther enters the palace with its access to high power and influence. She does not seem interested in whether God has any plan or purpose for her there. In fact, God is not even mentioned in the book of Esther. But that doesn’t mean that God has no plan or purpose for her in Ahasuerus’ court. As it happens, her cousin Mordecai is more scrupulous in keeping Jewish law, which after



some time puts him in conflict with Ahasuerus' highest official, Haman (Es. 3:1-6). Haman responds by plotting to kill not only Mordecai, but the whole Jewish people (Es. 3:7-15). Mordecai learns of the plot and sends word of the plot to Esther. Although her entire people are about to be destroyed, she seems unmoved.

Esther's excuse is that getting involved could jeopardize her position, and even her life (Es. 4:11). Already she seems to be losing the king's interest, having not been called into his presence for the past thirty days. It is inconceivable that the king is sleeping alone, therefore some other woman or women have been "called to come in to the king" (Es. 4:11). To intervene on behalf of her people would be too risky. Mordecai responds with two arguments. First, her life is at risk, whether or not she intervenes. "Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews" (Es. 4:13). And second, "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this" (Es. 4:14). Together, these arguments lead to a remarkable about-face by Esther. "I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish" (Es. 4:16). The social climber interested in no one's good but her own suddenly offers to risk her neck for the good of others.

Notice that Mordecai's two arguments appeal to different instincts. The first argument appeals to self-preservation. You, Esther, are a Jew, and if all the Jews are ordered killed, you will be found out and slain eventually. The second argument appeals to destiny, with its hint of divine service. If you wonder, Esther, why you of all young women ended up the king's wife, perhaps it is because there is a larger purpose to your life. The first argument seems base, while the second seems noble. Which argument produced the change in Esther?

Perhaps both of Mordecai's arguments are steps towards Esther's change of heart. The first step is identification. At long last, Esther identifies herself with her people. In this sense, she takes the same step Jesus was to take at his birth, identification of himself with humanity. And perhaps this step, selfishly taken as it may be in Esther's case, is what opens her heart to God's purposes.

The second step is service. Identifying now with her people's mortal peril, Esther takes on the service of intervening with the king. She risks her position, her possessions, her life. Her high position now becomes a means of service, instead of self-service. Despite her initially faithless and unobservant history, God uses Esther, no less than he uses the morally exemplary Ezra and Nehemiah. Esther's service corresponds to today's workplace in several ways:

Many people — Christian or not — make ethical compromises in their quest for career success. Because we all stand in Esther's shoes, we all have the opportunity — and responsibility — to let God use us anyway, despite our history of moral failure. Did you cut corners to get your position?

Nonetheless, God will use you to call an end to the deceptive practices in your workplace. Have you made improper use of corporate assets? God may still use you to clean up the falsified records in your department. Past hypocrisy is no excuse for failing to heed what God needs from you now. Prior misuse of your God-given abilities is no reason to believe you cannot employ them for God's good purposes today. Esther is the model for all of us who have fallen short of the glory of God. You cannot say, "If you knew how many ethical shortcomings I made to get here — I can't be of any use to God now."

God makes use of the actual circumstances of our lives. Esther's position gives her unique opportunities to serve God. Mordecai's position gives him different opportunities. We should embrace the particular opportunities we have. Rather than saying, "I would do something great for God, if only I had the opportunity," we should say, "Perhaps I have come into this position for just such as time as this."

Our positions are spiritually dangerous. We may come to equate our value and our very existence with our positions. The higher our positions, the greater the danger. Esther ceases to see herself as a young Jewish woman, but only as the queen of Persia. To do the same makes us slaves to factors beyond our control. If becoming CEO or getting tenure or keeping a good job becomes so important that we cut off the rest of ourselves, then we have lost ourselves already.

Serving God requires risking our positions. If you use your position to serve God, you might lose your position and your future prospects. This is doubly frightening if you have become self-identified with your job or career. Yet the truth is our positions are also at risk if we don't serve God. Esther's case is extreme. She may be killed if she risks her position by intervening, and she will be killed if she doesn't intervene. Are our positions really any more secure than Esther's? It is no foolishness to risk what you cannot keep in order to gain what you cannot lose. Work done in God's service can never truly be lost.

For Esther and the Jews, the story has a happy ending. Esther risks approaching the king unbidden, yet receives his favour (Es. 5:1-2). She employs a clever scheme to butter him up over the course of two banquets (Es. 5:4-8; 7:1-5) and to manipulate Haman into exposing his own hypocrisy in seeking to have the Jews annihilated (Es. 7:6-10). The king revokes the judgment against the Jews

(Es. 9:11-14) and rewards Mordecai and Esther with riches, honour and power (Es. 8:1-2; 10:1-3). They in turn improve the lot of Jews throughout the Persian Empire (Es. 10:3). Haman and the enemies of the Jews are slaughtered (Es. 7:9-10; 9:1-17). The dates of the Jews' deliverance — Adar 14 and 15 — are marked thereafter as the festival of Purim (Es. 9:17-23).

As noted earlier, God is not mentioned in the Book of Esther. Yet it is a book of the Bible. Commentators therefore look for the veiled presence of God in Esther and generally point to the crucial verse: "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for such a time as this?" (Es. 4:14). The implication is that she has come to her position not by luck, or fate, or by her own wiles, but by the will of an unseen actor. We can see the divine handwriting on the wall here. Esther has come to her royal position because the "good hand of God was upon [her]," as Ezra and Nehemiah might have said (Ezra 8:18, Nehemiah 2:18).

This challenges us to ponder how God might be at work in ways we don't recognize. When a secular company eliminates bias in promotions and pay scales, is God at work there? When a Christian is able to end deceptive record-keeping practices, does she have to announce that she did so because she's a Christian? If Christians have a chance to join with Jews and Muslims to make a case for reasonable religious accommodations in a corporation, should they see it as a work of God? If you can do good by taking a job in a compromised political administration, could God be calling you to accept the offer? If you teach in a school that pushes you to the limits of your conscience, should you seek to leave, or should you redouble your commitment to staying?

## **CONCLUSIONS TO EZRA, NEHEMIAH, AND ESTHER**

The books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther have several common features. All three are relatively short narratives about events happening during the reign of the Persian Empire. All three involve Persian kings and other government officials. All three focus on the activities of Jews who are seeking to thrive in an environment that is, in many ways, hostile to their exercise of faith in God. All three books bear witness to the fact that a Persian king could be helpful to the Jews in their effort to survive and thrive. All three feature key leaders whose actions are held up as models of imitation. And all three books show people at work, thus providing an opportunity for us to reflect upon how these books impact our understanding of work and its relationship to God.

Yet all three books represent a wide difference in opinion about crucial matters. This is true even of Ezra and Nehemiah, which were originally two parts of one book. In Ezra, trusting God requires that God's people travel

through dangerous territory without a royal escort. In Nehemiah, the offer of a royal escort is taken as evidence of God's blessing. Ezra represents what might be called "idealistic faith," while Nehemiah practices "pragmatic faith." In Esther, God's hand is hidden, revealed primarily in Esther's shrewd use of her wits and position in the service of her people. We could call hers a "clever faith."

Nevertheless, Ezra and Nehemiah uphold a similar vision of God's work in the world. God is involved in the lives of all people, not only his chosen ones. God moves in the hearts of pagan kings, leading them to support God's purposes. The Lord inspires his people to devote their work to him, using a wide variety of strong leaders and prophetic voices to fulfil his purposes. In Ezra, God uses a faithful priest to rebuild his temple. In Nehemiah, God uses a faithful lay person to rebuild the walls of his capital. In Esther, God uses a deeply compromised, initially unobservant Jew to save the Jewish people from genocide. From the perspective of all three books, God is at work throughout the world, making use of the work of all kinds of people.

## **The Chronology of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther**

### **Summary**

The author proposes a revision of Ussher and Jones' reading of the chronological data in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Daniel and John such that the Bible provides a continuous and unbroken chronology from the Creation until The Baptism of Christ. This paper supports the findings of Martin Anstey.

### **Introduction**

I have loved Biblical chronology since I was seventeen, as a Roman Catholic making acquaintance for the first time with the Gospel the Biblical way. After spending several years studying the Bible "Chronology of the Old Testament", it committed me more and more to the inspired Word of God, and from the years 1960 to wonder if we must rely upon Ptolemy's Cannon to bridge the chronology from Cyrus to Christ. Surely the Jewish Scribes of Christ's day did not depend upon the writings of the Greeks for their calculation of history, especially as the long-awaited Anointed One was due to arrive.

Furthermore, the "Ezra and Nehemiah Problem" as usually described and someone goaded me to suspect that there was a problem with the conventional chronology based on Ptolemy's Cannon. The problem is that the men listed as elders at the beginning of Ezra are also listed near the end of Nehemiah. If Nehemiah completed the wall in the reign of Artaxerxes Longimanus as the

Ussher-Jones chronology requires, every one of these elders must have lived to be over 135 years old. This suggested to me that something is amiss.

Therefore, I set out to study the problem trusting solely in the Word of God to provide the chronology – not concerning myself whether it contradicts Ptolemy or eclipse records. Operating upon that assumption I have made an interesting discovery concerning the 49<sup>th</sup> year that supports the findings of Anstey, Faulstich and Jordan that Ahasuerus of Esther, Darius the Persian of Ezra and Nehemiah, and Artaxerxes of Ezra and Nehemiah are all names of the same king: Darius Hystaspes. This solution bridges the chronology from Cyrus to Christ without appealing to secular sources.

### **My method is based on three assumptions:**

1. When the Teachers of the Law came to John the day before Christ's Baptism to ask if John was the Messiah or Elijah, their reason for doing so was that they knew that the following day the 69-week prophecy of Daniel was due to be fulfilled in the Anointing of the Messiah.
2. The reason Daniel 9:24-26 breaks the 490 years to the messiah into “7 weeks” and “three score and two weeks” and “one week” is explained in the following two verses. The two events listed are the two milestones along the way. The city and wall will be completed by the end of the first 7 weeks. The Anointed One will come at the end of the three score and two weeks.
3. The terms Xerxes and Artaxerxes are used interchangeably in Ezra and Nehemiah to mean the Persian Emperor. There are only two (or at most three) kings mentioned in these two books; however, they are called by several titles.

### **The Timing of Christ's Baptism**

Two verses of Scripture lead me to believe that the time of Jesus' baptism was the completion of the 483 years from the decree.

And as the people were in expectation, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ, or not. — Luke 3:15

And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou? And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ. And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No. Then said they unto him, Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself? He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias. And they which were sent were of the

Pharisees. And they asked him, and said unto him, Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elias, neither that prophet? John answered them, saying, I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not; He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose. These things were done in Bethabara beyond Jordan, where John was baptizing. The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. — John 1: 19-29

We know from the testimony of Josephus, as well as Gamaliel, that Judea had no shortage of fanatics leading sects in the desert. The Essenes had been living near the border of the Dead Sea for over a century at this time. However, it is evident from the expectation of the Teachers of the Law that they think John might be The One because of the timing of his ministry. The following day Christ is baptized. This is also the best-dated event in the Gospels. I propose this is the specific end date of the 483 years predicted by Daniel.

### **The Division in Daniel's Seventy Weeks**

Taking Hoehner, Keyser and Martin's independent calculations that the Baptism of Christ occurred in the Fall of 27 AD, this brings us back to 457 B.C.

The question is, what happened in 457 B.C.? Was this the decree of the 20<sup>th</sup> year of Artaxerxes Longimanus as Ussher and Jones assert , or was this the decree of Cyrus?

While agreeing with Jones that the letter sent by Artaxerxes to Asaph by the hand of Nehemiah is the only command of the king that specifically mentions the gates and the wall, there are two big problems with identifying this as the decree that kicks off Daniel's seventy weeks.

First, this is a letter to the king's forester, Asaph, directing him to supply timber to Nehemiah. It is not a published decree of the king as the prophecy requires.

Second, the prophecy of Daniel indicates that the decree will be at the beginning of a period of 49 years, during which the temple and city will be rebuilt; the letter in the 20<sup>th</sup> year of Artaxerxes is near the end of the rebuilding of the city and the temple.

When Cyrus issued a decree to rebuild the Temple, the rebuilding of the city walls was logically included. The reason is that all ancient temples were repositories of wealth offered to the god worshiped there. As such, temples were the prime targets for sacking by invading armies and marauding bands. To rebuild the Temple without a wall around the city, would be an public invitation

to bandits and petty tyrants of neighbouring domains. This very concern seems to have been the main part of Nehemiah's fear for the city of Jerusalem that led him to petition the king.

I suspect that Biblical researchers have focused in so narrowly on the wording of the decree that he has missed the bigger picture. The Temple, houses and the wall were all part of the city. It makes sense that in re- building Jerusalem the people would build the “heart” — the Temple — first, and then complete the rest of the city. The Decree of Cyrus kicked off the process that resulted in the city being rebuilt, including the walls, gates and street.

When we look at the text of Daniel 9:24-26, it is evident that the first period of 7 weeks (49 years) is completed when the city, temple and wall are finished.

Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince shall be seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks: the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times. And after threescore and two weeks shall Messiah be cut off, but not for himself: and the people of the prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary; and the end thereof shall be with a flood, and unto the end of the war desolations are determined. — Daniel 9:25-26.

This passage is a classic Hebrew parallelism. A B A' B'.

A – Seven Weeks

B – Threescore and two weeks

A' – The street shall be built again and wall in troublous times.

B' – After threescore and two weeks shall Messiah be cut off...

In this passage A' and B' are the events that mark the completion of the time periods described in A and B.

Based on this interpretation the Temple and City of Jerusalem would be rebuilt during the 70 weeks, not before. It appears that the ministry of Ezra and Nehemiah covered or completed the first 7 weeks of this passage. If this interpretation is correct, we should expect to find a date in Ezra and Nehemiah that comes 49 years after the Decree of Cyrus.

We will soon see that the text in Nehemiah requires us to identify Darius the Persian as Artaxerxes in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

The last date in the Book of Nehemiah is repeated twice. In verse 5:14 we are told Nehemiah served from the twentieth year of Artaxerxes until his thirty-second year. Again in verse 13:6 Nehemiah tells us that he returned to the King



in the 32 nd year and the king sent him back to Jerusalem shortly thereafter, probably allowing him to retire from service.

In verse 2:6 we find that the king asked Nehemiah how much time he needed to complete the task, and Nehemiah gave him a “set time.” Now Nehemiah undoubtedly had access to the prophecy of Daniel. As we shall see, the time that he chose appears to have been the end of the first 49 years. Nehemiah Page 4 completed the city wall within a few months of returning. But he stayed on the full twelve years and then returned to the King to report at the “set time” they had agreed upon twelve years earlier. During those twelve years he probably concerned himself with rebuilding the houses and infrastructure of the city and restoring the rule of the Torah Law of Yahweh in the hearts and minds of the people.

### **Who Were the Kings in Ezra and Nehemiah?**

I propose to identify the kings of Ezra and Nehemiah as follows:

VERSE	BIBLE NAME	CONVENTIONAL NAME
Ezra 1	Cyrus	Cyrus the Great
Ezra 4:6-7	Xerxes & Artaxerxes	Darius the Great
Ezra 4-6	Darius	Darius the Great
Ezra 7	Artaxerxes of Persia	Darius the Great
Nehemiah 2	Artaxerxes	Darius the Great
Nehemiah 12:22	Darius the Persian	Darius the Great

In Ezra 4:6-7 the name Xerxes and Artaxerxes are used one after the other. Scholars have generally assumed these were two different kings, also being different from Darius who followed them. However, there are three good reasons for believing they are two ways of referring to the same king.

1. The Author of Ezra and Nehemiah already set a precedent by using two names or titles for Zerubbabel. As we shall see, He continued the practice of using multiple titles for important rulers in the book. (Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah appear to have originally been one scroll. They were separated into four books by the time of Jerome at the end of the fourth century.)

It was common in antiquity for kings and rulers to have several names and titles that were used in different situations. We have an explicit example of this in Ezra where Zerubbabel is called “Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah” four times<sup>10</sup>. Ezra and Haggai both refer to Zerubbabel as governor or “prince” of Judah, and clearly state that Zerubbabel laid the foundation of the Temple.

Lest there be any doubt that Sheshbazzar is the same person as Zerubbabel, we are told in Ezra chapter 5, verses 14 and 16 that Cyrus appointed Sheshbazzar as governor, and this same Sheshbazzar laid the foundation of the Temple.

The fact that the name Sheshbazzar occurs twice in the passage relating to Cyrus' appointment, and twice again in the letter written to the Persian King, would lead us to suspect that Sheshbazzar is a Persian name or official title that Zerubbabel held. So, in Ezra – Nehemiah there is a precedent for using multiple titles for the same man.

2. The reign of Pseudo-Smerdis was so brief (7 months) that it is doubtful that there was time for news of his accession to reach Judah and the enemies of the Jews compose a letter and send it back and then get an answer from the usurper. In fact we know from several scriptural accounts that the journey from Jerusalem to Babylon took four months. Therefore it would have taken eight to twelve months for Jerusalem to receive news of “Smerdis” taking the throne, send a letter to him and receive and answer back.

Cambyes and Darius marched for Babylon as soon as they heard the news of the usurper. 10 Ezra 1:8, 1:11, 5:14, 5:16 Page 5 Cambyes apparently died en route, but Darius continued the march with the Army and with his seven friends, killed Pseudo-Smerdis and assumed the throne of the Medo-Persian Empire.

Furthermore, neither of these kings are likely to be Cambyes because he spent his entire reign in the field of conquest and died on the way back home from Egypt. Thus the accession of the first king after Cambyes provided the first real opportunity the enemies of the Jews had to obtain a reversal of Cyrus decree. Furthermore, these enemies of the Jews may have considered Darius to be the beginning of a new dynasty, and therefore been more likely to change the decree than Cambyes.

3. The structure of the passage is a classic Hebrew parallelism where the author repeats the same idea more strongly for emphasis. It opens the explanation of what the enemies of the Jews did to shut them down during the reign of “Artaxerxes”.

A. *In the days of Ahaseurus, in the beginning of his reign*

B. *They wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.*

A'. *In the days of Artaxerxes*

B'. *Also, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabel, and the rest of their companions wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the letter was written in Aramaic script, and translated into the Aramaic language. 8 Rehum [a] the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to King Artaxerxes in this fashion: (text of letter follows with the king's reply)*

The passage is telling us about one letter written by the opposition to a King of Persia who followed Cyrus. The passage starts generally, “*in the days of Ahaseurus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation...*”. In the second part of the parallelism, the author specifies exactly what he meant in the first part, “*In the days of Artaxerxes...[lists the actual names of the men who wrote the letter and the text of the letter.]*”

Therefore, the literary structure of the passage strongly suggests that the Ahaseurus here is the same man as the Artaxerxes mentioned here.

Furthermore, the passage is bracketed by references to Darius the Persian. In Ezra 4:5 the scope of the resistance is defined as being from Cyrus down to Darius the Persian. The next verse tells us about the letters written against them. Then we are told the building ceased until the second year of Darius the Persian (Ezra 5:24). Thus Ezra chapter four names the first (Cyrus) and last (Darius) of the three rulers of Persia during whose reign the city and temple were being rebuilt. The impostor Pseudo-Smerdis was evidently not considered to have been a real king. His execution was celebrated annually by the people of Persia down to Roman times.

As the narrative of Ezra continues, these enemies appealed again during the reign of a king identified as “Darius the Persian” in 4:24. Therefore the Xerxes and Artaxerxes of chapter four must either be the king who preceded Darius – namely, Cambyses, or Darius himself.

It is clear from the frequent use of the term Artaxerxes that it was a title of the King of Persia. There is an extant inscription in Persepolis of Xerxes, son of Darius in which he signs his inscription, “Xerxes the Arta” which means

“Xerxes the Great”. Jordan argues that Artaxerxes means “The Great King” or “The Emperor” in all of the places it is used in Scripture, similar to the way “Pharaoh” means the king or emperor of Egypt.

These names are not necessarily personal names, but are most likely throne names or even titles. It used to be thought that Xerxes means "king" and Artaxerxes means "high king." This is based on a statement in Herodotus, "In Greek, the name Darius means the Doer, Xerxes means the Warrior, and Artaxerxes means the Great Warrior" (Herodotus, *The History* 6:98; trans. David Grene; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987; p. 448). The Persian for Xerxes is Khshyarsha or Ksharsa, "which seems to correspond to the modern Persian shyr-shah, lion-king" (McClintock and Strong, *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* I:116). Artaxerxes "is a compound, the first element of which, arta — found in several Persian names — is generally admitted to mean great; the latter part being the Zend Khshethro, king" (*ibid.*, I:440).<sup>11</sup>

Darius issued a decree to finish the Temple in his second year. This is the same Darius who is called “Ahauserus” or Xerxes in the Book of Esther. He married Esther about the 7<sup>th</sup> year of his reign after several years of foreign conquest, and was deceived into Haman's plot in the 12<sup>th</sup> year of his reign.

### **Ezra mentions the sons of Darius Hystaspes:**

The mention of the "King's sons" in Ezra 7 corroborates the identification of the Artaxerxes of Ezra 7 with Darius Hystaspes, for he had several sons before he became King, who disputed the succession with his sons by his second wife Atossa, the daughter of Cyrus, one of whom Darius Hystaspes appointed to succeed him, viz. Xerxes.<sup>12</sup>

There is another clue that tells us that Darius the Persian is Artaxerxes in Ezra, Nehemiah, and Xerxes in the Book of Esther. Herodotus tells us the circumstances under which Darius came to power with the help of his seven friends who became the Seven Noble Men and were the closest advisors of the King. This was the cabinet of Darius the Persian.

In the decree of Artaxerxes recorded in Ezra 7 we read in verse 14, “*You are sent by the king and his seven advisors to inquire about Judah and Jerusalem...*”

### **Likewise, we find the seven nobles in Esther:**

And the next unto [Xerxes] was Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, which saw the king's face, and which sat the first in the kingdom... -- Esther 1:14

Despite the strong appearance that Darius, Artaxerxes, and Xerxes are all the same man, conventional chronologists may argue that the seven nobles of Darius became a permanent institution of Persian government. And that may be so.

Let us assume for a moment that Darius the Persian is Artaxerxes of Ezra and Nehemiah and Xerxes of Esther. Here is the time-line of his reign:

YEAR	EVENT
1	1st letter from the enemies of the Jews. Darius forbids them to build the walls of Jerusalem.
1-2	Darius spends the first two years putting down rebellion and securing his throne.
2	Zerrubabel re-starts building the Temple, and Tattenai writes a letter to Darius.
2	Darius replies to Tattenai's letter with a decree to finish the Temple.
3	Darius has a great six-month feast to celebrate peace in the Empire. Vashti deposed.
3-6	Darius invades India and outs tribute on the Isles of the (Agean) Sea.
6	The Temple is completed in the last month of the year (Adar).
7	Ezra departs in the month of Nisan to beautify the Temple.
7	King completes virgin selection, Esther installed as the new Queen of Persia.
12	Haman's plot to destroy the Jews foiled. Jews pillage their enemies.
20	Darius and his Queen (Esther) send Nehemiah to finish the city and the walls.
32	Nehemiah returns to report to Darius that his project

	is complete.
32	Darius sends Nehemiah back to Jerusalem to finish his life there.
36	Secular sources -- Darius dies.

Darius spent the first two years of his reign putting down rebellions and consolidating his power. Thus is it not surprising that the enemies of the Jews portrayed Jerusalem as a rebellious city. Darius said, no to the wall, but did not forbid the building of the Temple. When the governor of Trans-Euphrates wrote back for clarification about the Temple, Darius issued the decree to build it.

Notice that this chronology shows how the plot of Haman occurred in the interval between the rebuilding of the Temple and the construction of the Wall of Jerusalem. Haman attacked the Jews right at the most vulnerable time of their re-establishment in the Land. By waiting until after the most holy articles had been returned to the Temple but before the wall was built, Haman's decree<sup>13</sup> would have given the enemies of the Jews the opportunity to sack and burn the newly rebuilt temple, and loot the sacred vessels that had been preserved from the ancient days of the Tabernacle. Since Darius was favourable to the Jews at the beginning of his reign, Haman must have gradually poisoned the heart of the King against the Jews.

Does this historical revision comport with secular chronology? If we trust the Bible, and if my assumptions here are correct, we should find that the 32<sup>nd</sup> year of Darius the Persian was the 49<sup>th</sup> year from the Decree of Cyrus.

Now we have to turn to secular sources, not to bridge any gap, but to see if my hypothesis that the last recorded date in Nehemiah is the end of the first “seven weeks” is supported externally.

According to Ptolemy's Cannon the reigns of the three kings mentioned in Ezra 4:5 are as follows:

Cyrus	9
Cambyses	8
Darius the Persian	36

If Nehemiah returned to Susa in the 32<sup>nd</sup> year of Darius then it was the  $9+8+32 = 49$ th year from the decree of Cyrus to restore Jerusalem! Nehemiah returned to tell the King Darius and Queen Esther that the work of the first Jubilee<sup>15</sup> of Daniel's prophecy were complete. His reward was to be granted retirement in Jerusalem.

Thus it appears the most consistent interpretation of Ezra and Nehemiah is that Artaxerxes, Xerxes and Darius the Persian are all throne names referring to the same man, whom we know from Greek history as Darius Hystaspes.

### **The Final Proof**

This is all very convenient, but as I will now show, the text of Nehemiah requires us to identify Darius the Persian as the King in power during the career of Nehemiah.

*The Levites in the days of Eliashib, Joiada, and Johanan, and Jaddua, were recorded chief of the fathers: also the priests, to the reign of Darius the Persian.*  
— Nehemiah 12:22

The NIV translates the same verse, “*The family heads of the Levites in the days of Eliashib, Joiada, Johanan and Jaddua, as well as those of the priests, were recorded in the reign of Darius the Persian.*”

We have some men listed who were contemporary with Darius the Persian in whose time the family heads were recorded. These men, it turns out, are four generations of the family of the high priesthood:

*And Jeshua begat Joiakim, Joiakim also begat Eliashib, and Eliashib begat Joiada, and Joiada begat Jonathan, and Jonathan begat Jaddua.* — Nehemiah 12:10-11

Jeshua was the high priest in the generation that returned under Cyrus. He appears to have been a survivor of the exile, so he was over eighty years old when he returned in the first year of Cyrus. The men listed in the two verses above are his descendants through the fifth generation. Verse 12:22 just told us that these men, through Jaddua, were alive before or during the reign of Darius the Persian.

In chapter 13 we learn that the middle generation, Eliashib the High Priest, was in office when Nehemiah returned to the King in the 32<sup>nd</sup> year.

*And before this, Eliashib the priest, having the oversight of the chamber of the house of our God, was allied unto Tobiah...* — Nehemiah 13:4a



*But in all this time was not I at Jerusalem: for in the two and thirtieth year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon came I unto the king, and after certain days obtained I leave of the king... — Nehemiah 13:6-7a*

*And one of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was son in law to Sanballat the Horonite: therefore I chased him from me.— Nehemiah 13:28*

From these three verses we can see that even if the Eliashib of verse 13:4 was not the high priest, the Eliashib of verse 13:28 is clearly the same high priest and father of Joiada as the Eliashib of verse 12:10.

Since the family heads of the priests were recorded in the days of Darius the Persian, which were the days of Eliashib and his son and grandson, and since Eliashib was still high priest when Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem the second time, we must conclude that Nehemiah returned to “Artaxerxes, King of Babylon” in the 32<sup>nd</sup> year of Darius the Persian. This means that Darius the Persian is Artaxerxes of Nehemiah and the latter part of Ezra.

## **Objections**

Bullinger, Newton, Newton and others have argued against the reliability of Ptolemy's Canon. The Arundelian Marble (“Parian Marble”), carved shortly after Alexander the Great, lists far fewer Persian kings than Ptolemy. Furthermore, the list of Persian kings in Daniel's final vision only lists five Persian kings – Xerxes, son of Darius, being the last mentioned.

The objection that is most difficult for me is the testimony of three lunar eclipses that seem to verify the conventional chronology for Nebuchadnezzar and Cambyses. However, I see three possible answers to this objection.

First, lunar eclipses alone are an inaccurate way to try to pin down ancient historical events. The reason is that the Saros cycle of the moon causes eclipses to repeat every 18 years generally, every 54 years at the same longitude for the observer on Earth, and every 345 years under almost perfectly exact circumstances. The same eclipse will repeat for centuries before being replaced by another one. Likewise with a cluster of eclipses.

These cycles had been discovered and named by Babylonian astronomers no later than the Seleucid period. Both Hipparchus and Ptolemy were aware of them, to the degree that Ptolemy says that Hipparchus was able to compare the lunar eclipses of his era with those recorded by Babylonian astronomers 345 years earlier.

Whenever you encounter a historical date that was supposedly “astronomically verified” by a lunar eclipse alone be sceptical. Due to their repetitive nature,

eclipses can be used to verify whatever chronological scheme a person desires to prove.

The only way to pin down an ancient date with absolute certainty is if the positions of several planets are precisely recorded along with the position of the moon or the date – something of extreme rarity in ancient records.

It is quite possible that the same eclipse data cited by Ptolemy will match the shortened chronology indicated here by the Holy Scriptures.

A second possibility is that Ptolemy fabricated the eclipse data by back-calculating using his lunar model to make his chronology seem unquestionable. Newton and others have suggested this kind of fraud on Ptolemy's part.

However, I think there is a third, and most likely possibility that does not require us to accuse any man of deliberate deception. Eratosthenes of Cyrene (276 B.C. – 194 B.C.), librarian of the Great Library of Alexandria, created a historical chronology in which he interpolated year dates by estimating the number of generations to a given historical character in the past. He erroneously<sup>18</sup> assumed that the average generation was forty years<sup>19 20</sup>. If this was the case, then he might very easily have doubled the length of Greek history, because generation lengths can be highly variable and the historical average is closer to twenty-five years. Since the Persian Wars were a crucial part of the formative stage of Greek history, he naturally would have fit the Persian kings into his chronological system.

We know from astronomical diaries found from the third and fourth centuries before Christ that Babylonian astronomers calculated lunar eclipse dates that sometimes were not observed. This happened because their calculations were not precise enough to predict in which area of the Earth the eclipse would be visible.

A couple of generations after Eratosthenes lived Hipparchus (190 B.C. - 120 B.C.), the greatest astronomer of Greek history. It is entirely possible that Hipparchus or one of his students calculated a table of lunar eclipses several centuries into the past and then overlaid them on the chronology of Eratosthenes. By the time these records reached Ptolemy through the Great Library of Alexandria in the second century after Christ's Advent, they may very well have appeared to be a collection of observed eclipses, when they were in reality only a lunar ephemerides table that had been overlaid on Eratosthenes' chronology. (Any ephemerid table would have to be overlaid on a chronological scheme in order to have any meaning. Since the historical reference points for chronology have always been the reigns of kings, it would be natural to use a king list as the matrix for an ephemerid.)

In this scenario, Ptolemy back-calculated lunar eclipses using his own model and found his predicted eclipses matched the “observed” eclipses from antiquity. It is quite possible that he had merely duplicated the lunar calculations of Hipparchus using a different coordinate framework (geocentric vs. heliocentric). Furthermore, this would mean that most of the eclipses dated to certain regnal years in Ptolemy were never observed at all. They were calculated eclipses by either Hipparchus or Ptolemy or one of their contemporaries.

Astronomers since 1970 use NASA's most advanced lunar mathematics to back-calculate eclipses and their calculations showed that some of the “recorded” eclipses in Ptolemy's Canon could not have been observed because they were not visible from the region of Babylon<sup>22</sup>. This strongly suggests that some or all of the “ancient eclipse records” in Ptolemy were calculated eclipses, not real observations.

We should start with the Scripture and then test Ptolemy's eclipse data against it. If Ptolemy is wrong, it would not be the first ancient secular source to disagree with the Scriptures.

I also note that my suggested chronological revision does no damage to Dr. Jones' chronology from Solomon to Cyrus. The entire ancient system shifts as one piece with the date of the accession of Cyrus.

There is one possible objection from the Bible text. Ezra 6:14 says, “*They finished building the temple according to the command of the God of Israel and the decrees of Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes, kings of Persia.*”

It appears that since there were three decrees the Bible uses the three signatures on the decrees here. So if Darius assumed the title “Artaxerxes” between his sixth and seventh year, we would expect his decree sent with Ezra to be signed “Artaxerxes”. Likewise, Esther, written after the 12<sup>th</sup> year of Darius would refer to him as Xerxes or Artaxerxes. Another possibility is that the Author of the Bible conferred the title Artaxerxes (Great King) on Darius as soon as he completed God's Temple.

Jones rejects this argument on the weight of a *vav* translated as “and” instead of “even”. It seems a flimsy argument to make such a determination on the weight of a “*vav*” that could be translated either way.

## **The Great Jubilee**

To the Hebrew mind, the seventy weeks of seven years would immediately call to mind the Sabbath years instituted by Moses. Furthermore, the completion of the Temple and the city after “seven sevens” would bring to mind the both the 49 year Jubilee and the 49 days of the barley harvest feast from First Fruits to

Pentecost. The seventy weeks of sevens, would total ten Jubilees in length. Thus the coming of the Messiah at the conclusion of seventy sevens would be a “super-Pentecost” of sorts. Indeed it was!

Christ preached that the fields were ripe for harvest during the first summer of His ministry. Given that the grain harvest was normally finished by Pentecost, this suggests that his first year of ministry fell during either a Sabbath or a Jubilee year when the fields were left fallow and unharvested. Shortly thereafter he read the passage about the freedom for the captives in the synagogue. This passage was strongly associated with the Jubilee as opposed to the Sabbath year. (Slaves were freed in the seventh year of their servitude, not in the Sabbath year. But in the Jubilee, the slaves were set free early.)

I have here proposed that the first seven of Daniel's “sevens” were the forty-nine years from the Decree of Cyrus until Nehemiah's triumphant return to king Artaxerxes (Darius Hystaspes) in the 32<sup>nd</sup> year. This suggests that the Jubilee count was reset with the re-entry of Israel into the land under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Jeshua. This would make sense because the Sabbaths and Jubilees were specifically commanded for the Israelites to follow when they were in possession of the Land. Zerubbabel and Jeshua were a new Moses and Joshua, leading the people into the Holy Land, and when they took possession the Sabbath and Jubilee count were restarted.

It is also possible that the new Sabbath and Jubilee count perfectly intermeshed with the former one begun under Joshua's first conquest. However, the Moses-to-Nebuchadnezzar chronologies of Ussher, Jones and Anstey do not support this. They may all be wrong – they certainly don't agree with each other, so at least two of them are wrong. A full examination of this possibility is outside the scope of this paper.

Christ's crucifixion at his fourth Passover was exactly one Jubilee after Herod's rebuilding of the Temple was initiated. At His first Passover, the Jews said they had been 46 years in building the Temple. Three years later, He was crucified at Passover. This was not the end of the seventy weeks, as the Messiah came at the beginning of the last “week” (seven years) and was crucified in the middle of the last week. However, it is notable that the city and temple were built in 49 years at the beginning of the ten Jubilees to Messiah; and then the Temple was beautified for the last 49 years prior to Christ being offered as the Lamb of God.

## Conclusion

The text of Daniel 9 appears to state that Jerusalem would be rebuilt during the first seven weeks of the 70 week prophecy. The Scripture text in Nehemiah requires us to identify Darius the Persian as the king in power when Nehemiah finished his mission to rebuild Jerusalem. If Nehemiah finished his job in the 32nd year of Darius the Persian, we find that was the 49th year from the decree of Cyrus to restore Jerusalem and the Temple. This forces us to conclude that Ptolemy's Canon is in error by 82 years in the era of the Persian Empire and the Decree of Cyrus was in the year 457 B.C.



*The Old City of Jerusalem at he busy Damascus Gate*

## Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther Outlines

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah (and Esther) cover about 100 years, closing the Old Testament historical books. The books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles closed with the Southern Kingdom ("Judah") going into captivity. These two post-exile books record the return from Babylon after its fall to the

Persians under Cyrus, the rebuilding of the Temple and Jerusalem, and the reestablishment of the national life.

The historian Josephus, the church father Jerome, and the Talmud considered the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah as one. The Hebrew Bible also has the books together as a single work. However, there is evidence that the two books were originally separate. (The events in the Book of Esther occurred between the events recorded in Ezra 6 and Ezra 7.)

Through the protection and help of three Persian kings (Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes), and the leadership of such great and godly Jews as Zerubbabel, Joshua, Haggai, Zechariah, and Ezra, the second Temple was completed and true worship restored in Jerusalem.

Cyrus was able to boast that the conquest of Babylon was almost bloodless, with no significant damage to the city. Daniel (who lived at least until the third year of Cyrus) presented to Cyrus with the writings of Isaiah, <sup>4</sup> which included a letter - addressed to Cyrus by name - written 150 years earlier!<sup>5</sup> As a result, the Jews were actually encouraged by Cyrus to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild their temple. Furthermore, he gave them back the vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had plundered from Solomon's Temple and he contributed financially to the construction of their second temple. Only about 50,000 Jews responded to this royal proclamation and returned to Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel. A year later, on July 23, 537 B.C., the return of Jewish exiles under Zerubbabel got underway just seventy years after the captivity began (just as Jeremiah had predicted). One of the by-products of the revival under Ezra seems to have been an ineffective effort on the part of the Jews to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. This in turn provoked the wrath of Rehum and Shimshai, who wrote an accusation against them to Artaxerxes.<sup>7</sup> The king commanded the work to cease until a further decree should be issued (Ezra 4:21). Rehum and Shimshai, upon receiving this decree from the king, hurried to Jerusalem and "made them to cease by force and power," presumably breaking down the wall that had been started and burning the gates (Ezra 4:23; Neh 1:3). It was the news of this fresh disaster that shocked Nehemiah and brought him to his knees before God.

## **Nehemiah**

The Book of Nehemiah covers a period of at least twenty years, from December, 445 B.C., to about 425 B.C., when Nehemiah returned from Babylon to cleanse Jerusalem and the province of various evils that had crept in during his absence since 432 B.C. The careers of Ezra and Nehemiah overlap, as may be seen in Neh 8:1-9 and 12:26. (It is quite probable that Malachi prophesied during the

governorship of Nehemiah, for many of the evils he denounced are found to be prominent in the Book of Nehemiah.)

Nehemiah served as cupbearer to Artaxerxes I, the son of Ahasuerus (Xerxes), who took Esther to be his queen. Nehemiah's obtaining authorization to rebuild the walls and city of Jerusalem was the very decree that Gabriel had predicted to Daniel 95 years earlier in 539 B.C. This decree was issued on March 14, 445 B.C. and would trigger the most astonishing prophecy in the Old Testament: The Seventy "Weeks" of Daniel Chapter 9. The example of Nehemiah's passion for the truth of God's Word, whatever the cost or consequences, is an example sorely needed in this present hour. May the prayerful study of this book lead more of God's people today to "earnestly contend for the faith which has been delivered unto the saints."

## **EZRA**

Ezra 1-4	Rebuilding Begins in Jerusalem
Ezra 5-7	Babylon-Persia Recognizes The God of Heaven
Ezra 8-10	Repenting, Returning, Confessing, Correcting

"This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: 'The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah.'" (1:2)

The book of Ezra is part of a continuous history of the Jews written after their exile (Babylon) consisting of 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. This book of Ezra records the first and second stages of the restoration of the Jews to their homeland. The book was written to show the faithfulness of God in returning a Jewish remnant from exile in Babylon.

Chapter 1 recounts the beginning of the first return of the exiles to Jerusalem. His heart moved by God, King Cyrus of Persia issues a decree allowing some exiles to return to Israel. (1:2-4) Chapter 2:1-63 contains a list of the exiles who returned. The group was led by Zerubbael (SheshBazzar 1:11?) Arriving at the house of the Lord in Jerusalem, free will offerings were taken for temple reconstruction.

In Chapter 3, a united group (vs 1) began to build the altar of the God of Israel. The Bible says "despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the Lord... vs 2. Even though the temple had not yet been rebuilt, they made sacrifices for all the



appointed sacred feasts. Another free will offering was taken for temple rebuilding. This temple construction was done under the supervision of the Levites. (vs 8)

Opposition to the rebuilding quickly mounts. An attempt to infiltrate the process from the Samaritans (probably) is turned aside. More serious opposition to the rebuilding occurs when a letter is sent to new King Artaxerxes, who forces them to stop.

The final verse of Chapter 4 says "Thus the work on the House of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill...."



*Damascus Gate, Old City Jerusalem, Israel*

# **Commentary of the Book of Ezra**

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **1. The edict of Cyrus**

#### **Verses 1-4. The proclamation**

#### **Verses 5-11. Gifts provided**

### **THE CAPTIVES OF JUDAH LIBERATED (vv. 1-11)**

When the Medes and Persians defeated Babylon, Darius the Mede was ruler, and not until Cyrus the Persian took the throne was liberty proclaimed to Judah. This was God's time, as He had foretold by Jeremiah (Jer. 25:12) and Isaiah (Isa. 44:28). The proclamation of Cyrus is definite and specific, that he was persuaded that the Lord God of heaven had commanded him to build a house at Jerusalem. It seems rather strange that a Gentile king would be so emphatic in thus speaking for God, but it is recorded that God Himself had stirred up the spirit of Cyrus (v.1).

He invited and encouraged God's people, the Jews, to return to Jerusalem with the object of building God's house there. Notice, he does not give any honor to the idols of Persia, but says of the God of Israel, "He is God" (v. 3). He also gave instructions to neighbours of anyone who was concerned about taking this journey to Jerusalem, to "help him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, besides the freewill offerings for the house of God, which is in Jerusalem" (v. 4). This was not only a matter of liberating slaves, but enriching them. Thus Cyrus was rightly representing a God of grace.

This proclamation had positive effect on the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin and on priests and Levites, as well as others whose spirits God had moved. Of course, their number was small compared to the number who had been taken captive, but God is pleased with every response of faith to His working.

People in the vicinity of those who purposed to go were willing to help them as Cyrus had directed, giving them articles of silver and gold, goods and livestock and precious things, that is, things of special value (v. 6). This shows at least that those so exercised to go to Jerusalem had not incurred the contempt of the people among whom they lived.

More importantly still, King Cyrus had all the articles that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem, brought out from the temple of his idols, to send them back to their rightful place. He knew that Babylon's idols were not *God*. The Persian treasurer, Mithredath, counted these out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. The record of them was faithfully kept, 30 gold platters, 1000 silver platters, 29 knives, 30 gold basins, 410 silver basins, and 1000 other articles. The total number of gold and silver articles was 5,400. Sheshbazzar took charge of all these, to bring them from Babylon to Jerusalem (vv. 9-11).

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **2. The returning exiles**

**Verses 1-65. Register of those who returned.**

**Verses 66-70. The property and gifts of those who returned**

#### **LIST OF RETURNED CAPTIVES (vv. 1-58)**

This chapter shows the definite interest God had in every individual who returned from the captivity, so that the number from each city is recorded, and the total number. We are reminded in verse 1 that it was Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon who had taken these captive. Babylon means "confusion," so that Judah is pictured as being captives to a state of confusion, as is repeated in the history of the professing church. It is only by the power and grace of God that any measure of recovery can be accomplished. No full recovery will be made in Israel until the Lord Himself come in power and glory, and similarly, there will be no full recovery of the church's condition until in the presence of the Lord. Yet certain small measures of recovery have taken place from time to time by the clear intervention of the Spirit of God.

Verse 2 speaks of leaders who came with Zerubbabel, the first Jeshua, the high priest. The Nehemiah mentioned here cannot be the Nehemiah whose book follows Ezra, for he did not come at first, nor with so large a company (Neh. 2:9).

From verse 3 to verse 35 the people of various cities are enumerated, then from verse 36 to 39 priests are mentioned as being included in the number of those returning. Levites then are spoken of in verse 40 and singers in verses 41-42. Verse 43 introduces the Nethinim, whose total number was 392 (v.58). The

Nethinim are referred to in Ezra 8:20 as having been appointed by David for the service of the Levites, probably Gibeonites who had been received by Joshua (Josh. 9:23).

We have remarked that the Nethinim were likely Gibeonites who had entered the congregation at the time of Joshua, who told them, "There shall none of you be freed from being bondmen, and hewers of wood and drawers of water for the house of my God" (Josh. 9:23). We do not read of any of them refusing this place of submission to Israel, and their willingness to return to Judah indicates a remarkable allegiance to the God of Israel, since they were Gentiles and had been away from Judah for 70 years. After so long an absence, not all of the Jews were prepared to return to their own country, so that the faith of their Gentile adherents shines out the more brightly.

### **SOME OF WHOM THERE WAS DOUBT(vv. 59-63)**

On the other hand, there were some who came from Tel Melah, but could not prove that they were really Israelites (vv. 59-60). Do they not remind us of some today who would like to be regarded as Christians, yet do not present a clear testimony that they are saved? It is not told us what was done concerning these people; but verses 61-63 refer to sons of the priests who came, but their names were not found registered in the genealogy. In this case, the governor decreed that they should not be permitted to act as priests until a priest with Urim and Thummim would pronounce them fit for this service. The Urim and Thummim (meaning "lights and perfections") were 12 jewels set in the breastplate of judgment (Ex. 28:30; Lev. 8:8) attached to the ephod of the high priest. It was used for the discerning judgment of God's mind concerning any problems in Israel. The 12 stones speak of the unity of the tribes of Israel, indicating that all questions must be considered from the viewpoint of that unity of all. But since the 10 tribes had been separated from Judah and Benjamin, there is no mention of any priest having the Urim and Thummim; consequently, proper discernment according to God was lacking. Actually, this will only be restored when the Lord Jesus comes in power and glory to reunite Judah and Israel. He is the High Priest who has the Urim and Thummim.

It is important to apply these principles in the present day. In the professing church it has been the practice for many years to welcome anyone who claims to be a Christian to every Christian privilege of fellowship, including the breaking of bread. Many of these were not saved, and many proved to be enemies of the cross of Christ; some denying the deity of Christ and other basic doctrines of scripture. Just as in the return from Babylon, so when God brings His saints to realize the truth of His Word, there must be concern to know that those who

gather in fellowship with the saints are truly saved by the grace of God. If there is any doubt about this matter, their being received to break bread should be delayed until no doubt remains.

If some should protest that this is too rigid, there is a clear scriptural answer for this, "Whatever is not from faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23). If it is not faith that moves a person to desire to break bread, then it is sin. Should we encourage any person to sin? Therefore, it is only proper care for souls that we should seek to make sure they are acting by faith in so serious a matter.

### **TOTALS OF PEOPLE, LIVESTOCK, ETC. (vv. 64-70)**

The whole assembly totaled 42,360, plus servants and singers adding 7,537 to the number. This was only a small percentage of Judah and Benjamin, but the Lord took account of every one. Their livestock numbered 736 horses, 245 mules and 6,720 donkeys. As to the number of horses alone, this was as nothing compared to Solomon's 40,000 stalls of horses (1 Kings 4:26). But at least Judah did have "a little strength" (Compare Revelation 3:8).

As to the money necessary for rebuilding, there were those of the heads of the fathers' houses who offered freely, according to their ability, so that the treasury was benefited by 61,000 gold drachmas, 5000 minas of silver and 100 priestly garments. The gold and silver too was nothing compared to the amount that came to Solomon in one year (1 Ki. 10:14, 17), but God records this because of His appreciation of the faith of these givers. The Lord Jesus said of Mary of Bethany, "She has done what she could" (Mk. 14:8). These also had done what they could, and the Lord valued this. What more could be expected of anyone? Not all of these who returned to Judah were engaged in rebuilding the temple: for the most part the priests and Levites, some of the people, the gatekeepers and Nethinim, dwelt in their cities. The temple would have had little significance if there were no residents in any of the cities of Judah. Though the numbers in the cities would be small in comparison to their size before the captivity, yet each city would be a testimony to the restoring grace of God. Today also, each little assembly that God restores is a testimony to His grace and faithfulness, though such testimonies are far from being an occasion for our own pride. While we are thankful for God's goodness, we are only humbled by our own weakness.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **3. The temple begun**

#### **Verses 1-7. The altar erected**

#### **Verses 8-13. Foundation of the temple laid**

### **THE ALTAR AND SACRIFICES RESUMED (vv. 1-8)**

Though the building of the temple did not begin until the second month of the second year (v. 8), the children of Israel gathered together "as one man" in the seventh month of the year to Jerusalem, that is, the same year they returned to Judah. At least they could build the altar of God, which symbolized their relationship with God on the basis of sacrifice. We too can have no relationship with God apart from the sacrifice of Christ at Calvary. That sacrifice is therefore the basis of true worship. Jeshua the high priest, son of Jozadak and his brethren the priests, as well as Zerubbabel the governor, son of Shealtiel, and his brethren, lesser rulers in Judah, together joined in rebuilding the altar with the object of offering burnt offerings to the Lord. The burnt offering, being the most important of all the offerings, speaks of the glory that God receives from the value of the sacrifice of Christ. They were concerned too that they should do this consistently with what was written years before by Moses, the man of God. In spite of their fear of the opposition to the true worship of God, they set the altar upon its bases. They established their worship on the true basis of the Word of God, not hiding this from the eye

This seventh month too was the month of the Feast of Tabernacles, and they kept this according to the written law, offering daily burnt offerings. Surely believers today are encouraged by this, even when deprived of the outward blessing of which the temple speaks, to do what they are able in giving the Lord His place of supreme honour.

After this Feast of Tabernacles, they continued to offer regular burnt offerings and offerings for the New Moons and for all the appointed feasts of the Lord. There were those also who offered freewill offerings to the Lord, offerings moved by special exercise of faith on the part of individuals. How good if we today engage in something like this too!

Verse 6 reminds us that they began these offerings from the first day of the seventh month, though the foundation of the temple had not yet been laid. But

in preparation for building, they gave money to masons and carpenters, as well as food, drink and oil to the people of Sidon and Tyre, that they should bring cedar logs from Lebanon to the sea, to be floated to Joppa, from whence they would be transported to Jerusalem (v. 7). This was according to the directive of Cyrus. This was certainly not on the scale that prevailed in Solomon's building of the temple (1 Ki. 5:11-14), but the supplies were from the same source.

### **THE REBUILDING BEGINS (vv.8-13)**

Preparations and gathering of materials for the rebuilding took some length of time, so that it was the second month of the second year before the building of the foundation began (v.8). Zerubbabel the governor, Jeshua the high priest with the other priests and Levites took the initiative to unitedly begin the building.

When the foundation was laid the people paused to celebrate this glad occasion. We may rightly say that, though everything was not yet accomplished, the basis of truth was recognized, which is a reminder of 2 Timothy 2:19, "Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands." When there has been departure from the truth and saints of God are exercised by God to return to Him, it is of vital encouragement to be reminded that God's solid foundation stands. Surely it is this, and nothing less that we desire! Thus it was fitting that Judah should rejoice when the foundation was laid. Priests stood in their apparel with trumpets and Levites with cymbals, to praise the Lord (v. 10). Their praise and thanksgiving too was expressed in song, celebrating the goodness and mercy of the Lord. The people responded also with a great shout of rejoicing (v. 11).

However, though many of the older priests and Levites who had seen the first temple were thankful for this small measure of recovery, they wept in comparing the small size of this foundation with that which they had known before. Do we not today have something of the same sorrow when we consider the first estate of the Church of God when seen as established through the work of the Holy Spirit in the apostles, and compare it with the smallness of any recovery that has been seen since the failure and departure of the church generally? But the shout of joy evidently countered the sorrow of weeping.

There have been various measures of recovery of the truth of God in the church, as in Israel, though it seems as time goes on, such occasions have become more feeble, and it was so in Israel too. For it was not long after this return from captivity and the joy that Judah experienced, before their condition again deteriorated so sadly that by the end of the Old Testament Malachi records, not only the failure, but the rebellion of priests together with the people generally.

Only a few then truly sought the Lord, of whom we read, "a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and who meditate on His name" (Mal. 2:16).



### **Archaeological light**

*Esarhaddon's annals on a cuneiform cylinder now in the British Museum recount the deportation of the Israelites and the settlement of colonists in their place.*

*Esarhaddon ruled the Assyrian Empire c. 680-669 B.C. Sennacherib, was assassinated in 681 by two of his older sons while his younger son, Esarhaddon, was in the north with his troops. On hearing of the coup, Esarhaddon led his troops back to the capital and siezed the throne. The 10 ft. 7*



*in. basalt steal above shows the powerful monarch and two defeated kings tethered in front of him.*

*From the Prism B, published by R. Campbell Thompson, op. cit.. Translation: ibid., pp. 25 f.*

*(v 54--vi I)*

*I called up the kings of the country Hatti and (of the region) on the other side of the river (Euphrates) (to wit): Ba'lu, king of Tyre, Manesseh (Me-na-si-i), king of Judah (Ia-ú-di), Quaushgabri, king of Edom, Musuri, king of Moab, Sil-Bel, king of Gaza, Metini, king of Ashkelon, Ikausu, king of Ekron, Milkiashapa, king of Byblos, Matanba'al, king of Arvad, Abiba'al, king of Samsimuruna, Puduil, king of Beth-Ammon, Ahimilki, king of Ashdod--12 kings from the seacoast; Ekishtura, king of Edi'il (Idalion), Pilagura (Pythagoras), king of Kitrusi (Chytros), Kisu, king of Sillu'ua (Soli), Ihauandar, king of Pappa (Paphos), Erisu, king of Silli, Damasu, king of Kuri (Curium), Atmesu, king of Tamesi, Damusi, king of Qarti-hadasti (Carthage), Unasagusu, king of Lidir (Ledra), Busuru, king of Nuria,--10 kings from Cyprus (Iadnana) amidst the sea, together 22 kings of Hatti, the seashore and the islands; all these I sent out and made them transport under terrible difficulties, to Nineveh, the town (where I exercise) my rulership, as building material for my palace: big logs, long beams (and) thin boards from cedar and pine trees, products of the Sirara and Lebanon (Lab-na-na) mountains, which had grown for a long time into tall and strong timber, (also) from their quarries (lit.: place of creation) in the mountains, statues of protective deities (lit.: of Lamassû and Shêdu) made of anan-stone, statues of (female) abzaztu, thresholds, slabs of limestone, of anan-stone, of large- and small-grained breccia, of alallu-stone, (and) of gi.rin.hi.li.ba-stone.*

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **4. Work on the temple stopped**

**Verses 1-5. Enemies endeavour to hinder the building of the temple**

**Verses 6-24. Recital of continued opposition (parenthetical)**

**PRETENDED FRIENDSHIP AND OPPOSITION (vv. 1-5)**

Satan is subtle in the way he attacks a work of God. He appears to be friendly, as is seen in the way the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin came to Zerubbabel

and other leaders of Judah, offering to help them to build the temple. They say they have been brought there by the King of Assyria (which was true), and that they had sacrificed to the Lord since that time (v. 2). This may have some semblance of truth in it, but they were Gentiles who had come into the land and adopted some of Israel's forms of worship, but we are told, "They feared the Lord, yet served their own gods" (2 Ki. 17:33).

Zerubbabel and Jeshua discerned their true character and told them firmly that they could not accept their help, but they alone (Judah and Benjamin) would do this work according to the decree of Cyrus, king of Persia (v. 3). Believers today too must not accept the help of unbelievers (however friendly they seem) in building that which speaks of the recovery of the truth of the Assembly of God.

Then the people of the land changed their tactics, showing that their offer of help in building was deceitful, for they did not want the temple rebuilt at all. They tried to discourage the Jews from their work, causing all the trouble they could and even hiring counselors with the object of frustrating their labors. Their opposition continued throughout the reign of Cyrus until Darius king of Persia.

### **LETTER OF ACCUSATION AGAINST JUDAH (vv. 6-16)**

The friction was long continued, for in verse 6 we read of these adversaries writing a letter to King Ahasuerus, accusing the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem, though nothing is said about the results of their letter. But in the days of Artaxerxes also, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel and others wrote a letter to that current king of Persia (v.7). It seems this was in addition to the letter of Rehum the commander and Shimshi the scribe, whose letter is quoted in verses 11 to 16. They speak of themselves as representatives of a number of peoples who had been taken captive by Sennacherib and settled in the cities of Samaria (vv. 9-10). Whether they actually represented those nations in writing as they did, maybe very questionable, but they wanted their letter to appear convincing.

They first remind the Persian king that the Jews now in Jerusalem had come up from Persia and were building what they call "the rebellious and evil city," finishing its walls and repairing its foundations (v. 12). They did not inquire of Artaxerxes as to the reason for Cyrus sending the Jews back, nor did Artaxerxes think of inquiring into this himself. But they write positively to the effect that if the city was rebuilt the inhabitants would not pay tax, tribute or custom to Persia (v. 13). Were they really concerned about Persia? Only insofar as they could benefit through Persia. This was like the Pharisees telling Pilate concerning the

Lord Jesus, "If you let this Man go, you are not Caesar's friend" (Jn. 19:12). They had no love for Caesar, but used his name to frighten Pilate. But these adversaries of Judah only wanted Artaxerxes to surmise that the Jews would not pay tribute to Persia. They suggest a mere pleasing platitude to the king when they wrote that it was not proper for them to see the kings's dishonour (v. 14).

They asked the king for a search of there cords to find out that Jerusalem was a rebellious city, causing harm to kings (of course such Gentile kings as Nebuchadnezzar). It was true that Zedekiah had rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar after having sworn allegiance to him, and for this reason Jerusalem was destroyed. But they did not ask for records of Cyrus having sent the Jews back to rebuild the temple. Instead they declare that if Jerusalem was rebuilt the king would lose his dominion on the west side of the River Euphrates (v. 16).

### **THE KING'S ANSWER (vv.17-24)**

Artaxerxes replied to this letter, telling Rehum, Shimshi and their companions that their letter had been clearly read to him, so the he gave command to search the records, which confirmed the fact that Jerusalem had on occasion revolted against Gentile kings and also that Jerusalem had had mighty kings who collected tax, tribute and custom from others (v. 20). Since this was true, the king did not want to see Jerusalem revive in such a way as to require tribute from others rather than to pay tribute to Persia.

Therefore, he commanded that the Jews be forced to cease their building until a command should be given by him to allow it (v. 21). His reason was simply that he was thus guarding against any damage the kings might suffer (v. 22). He ought to have realized that any rebellion against Persia was extremely unlikely, for the Jews were reduced so greatly to a state of weakness that their former state would never be recovered.

Having this authority from the king, these adversaries went immediately to Jerusalem and by force of arms stopped their work. Thus the work of rebuilding was discontinued until the second year of Darius king of Persia. This connects with verse 5 of this chapter. Thus Satan gained his object for the time, but God was not defeated.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **5-6. The temple work resumed and completed**

#### **5:1-7. Haggai's and Zechariah's ministry**

#### **6:1-22. The temple finished**

### **WORK RESUMED AND OPPOSITION RESUMED (vv. 1-5)**

The initiative for resuming the work had come from the Lord who moved the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to speak in His name to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem. Haggai's prophecy is recorded in the book bearing his name, which begins, "In the second year of King Darius on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came to Haggai the prophet, to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua, the son of Jehozadak, the high priest" (Hag. 1:1).

The Lord ignored the decree of Artaxerxes that the building must not take place before he had given permission. Whose word was to be obeyed, that of Artaxerxes or that of the Lord? The people were saying, "the time has not come, that the Lord's house should be built" (Hag. 1:2). No doubt they would appeal to the fact that Artaxerxes had not given them permission. But the Lord asks them, "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your pane led houses, and this temple to be in ruins?" (Hag. 1:4). Haggai prophesied concerning the house of God, while Zechariah emphasized the city of Jerusalem. Here in Ezra we are told that Zerubbabel and Jeshua began to build the house, but with the help of the prophets (v. 2). The city was only to surround the house, but the house was God's centre.

But the work of God will always be opposed by Satan, and the adversaries of Judah came to question them as to their having authority to build the temple and to repair the wall (v. 3). These were different men than had opposed them before, so that evidently a good deal of time had elapsed since the work had been stopped.

Judah had nothing to hide, and told them the names of the men who were supervising the work. They told them more than this also, as is reported in the letter that Tattenai sent to the king of Persia (vv. 7-16). At this time Tattenai could not make them cease working because "the eye of God was upon the

elders of the Jews" (v. 5). God had commanded them to build and He would restrain any effort of the enemy to resist them.

### **A LETTER TO DARIUS (vv.6-17)**

Tattenai then wrote a letter to King Darius, not in the same hostile strain as Rehum and his companions had written to Artaxerxes (ch. 4:12-16), but simply inquiring as to the truth of what the Jews had told him. The message was sent as from the governor of the region beyond the river (Tattenai), Shether Boznai and their companions, the Persians beyond the River. These were Persians therefore, not the men of the captivity, as in the case of chapter 4:14.

Their letter to Darius begins in reporting that work was progressing rapidly in the building of the temple of the great God at Jerusalem (v. 8). They did not consider the God of Israel as similar to one of the idols of the nations, but recognized Him as *the* great God. Their presentation of the whole matter was restrained and fair, not demanding that the work be stopped, but inquiring as to its being permitted by the king of Persia.

They reported asking the elders of Judah as to who gave them authority to build, and they replied that they were the servants of the God of heaven and earth and were rebuilding the temple built by a great king (Solomon) many years before. Thus their authority was primarily from God.

However, they told that the reason for the destruction of the temple, that their fathers had provoked the God of heaven to anger, so that He had delivered them into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, under whose authority the temple was destroyed and the Jews carried into captivity (v. 12). This was thoroughly accurate.

But they appealed also to an earthly authority, Cyrus king of Babylon. Actually he was king of Persia (ch.1:1), but since Persia had captured Babylon, Cyrus was king over Babylon too. In his first year (they affirmed) Cyrus had issued a decree to build this house of God (v. 13), giving orders too that the gold and silver articles of the house of God should be taken from Nebuchadnezzar's temple in Babylon and restored to Jerusalem. These things were placed under the authority of one named Sheshbazzar whom Cyrus had made governor, and this governor had come to Jerusalem and laid the foundation of the temple (v. 14).

Tattenai appeared to have been quite fair in the way he reported what the Jews had said, ending with their assertion that Sheshbazzar had come to Jerusalem and had laid the foundation of the house of God, but though it had been long under construction, it was not yet finished.

Their request to the king then was, not that he should find out if Jerusalem was a rebellious city, as was the charge of Rehum and Shimshi before (ch. 4:12-16), but rather that he should find if the records showed a command of Cyrus to rebuild the temple, and that the king would express his own mind to them as regards this matter (v. 17).

## **CHAPTER 6**

Having received the letter from Tattenai, Darius ordered that a search be made in the archives where the treasures were stored in Babylon. There is no doubt that God led the searchers to Achmetha in the province of Media, to find a scroll that recorded the decree of Cyrus concerning the rebuilding of the temple. The words of the decree are quoted in verses 3-5, confirming what has been told us in Ezra 1:1-11. Verses 6-12 record the words of Darius in reply to Tattenai. Neither this governor nor any of his companions was to interfere in the matter of the rebuilding of the temple, letting the work of this house of God alone (vv. 6-7), but allowing full right to the governor and the elders of the Jews to build as they had been given permission.

But more than that, Darius issued a decree that the cost of building should be borne by taxes due the king from his possessions west of the river (v. 8). Rehum had urged that if the temple were built, then the Jews would not pay taxes, but Darius decreed that the Jews would have tax money paid to them! Yet this was not all. Any needs the Jews had, bulls, rams and lambs for burnt offerings, wheat, salt, wine and oil, were to be given them at the requests of the priests in Jerusalem, not only on one occasion, but "day by day." It is interesting that Darius desired that the Jews should offer sacrifices to the God of heaven, and to pray for the life of the king and his sons (v. 10). Does not this appear to be a true work of God in the king's soul? Today, whatever government Christians may be under, it is important that they pray for those in authority over them.

Darius evidently thought it necessary also to solemnly decree that anyone who sought to alter his edict was to have his house destroyed and he himself hanged from the timber of his house (v. 11). This would rather effectually arrest any show of hostility by the enemies of the Jews. Then Darius also invoked the God of Israel to act against any king or people who opposed the building of the house

of God. He closed with the firm declaration, "I Darius issue a decree: let it be done diligently" (v. 12).

### **THE TEMPLE COMPLETED (vv. 13-18)**

Tattenai the governor and those associated with him did not hesitate to obey the king's decree, but were diligent in carrying out all his orders (v. 13). Through the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah the Jews had resumed their building, and continued it also under such prophesying (v. 14). The decree of Darius was not sufficient to keep them building: they needed the help of God, just as we too need the grace and blessing of God if we are to build up the Church of God according to His Word.

We are not given precise dates as regards the length of the reign of Cyrus, Ahasuerus, Artaxerxes and Darius, so that we do not know how long the rebuilding took, but it was much longer than Solomon's seven years in building the first temple (1 Ki. 6:38), and it was finally completed in the sixth year of King Darius (v. 15).

Thus God was honoured in the restoration of His house, which is typical of the eventual restoration of the temple in the millennium as described in Ezekiel 40, though this in Ezra's time was much smaller. Since God was honoured, the Jews had perfect right to rejoice in celebration of this glad event of the dedication of the temple. A large offering was made, though it was small in comparison to Solomon's offerings at the dedication of the first temple (1 Ki. 8:62-63). In Ezra's case, the offerings were 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs and twelve male goats (v. 17). But the important matter is that all of these are types of the Lord Jesus in various aspects of the value of His sacrifice at Calvary. The priests and Levites were assigned to their proper places of service in connection with the temple, as prescribed in the book of Moses, no doubt specially Leviticus.

### **CELEBRATION OF THE PASSOVER (vv. 19-22)**

A Passover could finally be kept in Jerusalem. Previous to this, the last Passover recorded is that of Josiah, which must have taken place over 100 years before this (2 Chron. 35:1-19). This too was kept on the proper day, in contrast to the Passover in Hezekiah's time (2 Chron. 30:1-3), which was kept in the second month because many were not purified in the first month. On this occasion the priests and Levites had purified themselves, which speaks not only of being personally cleansed, but purified from any identification with evil, just as today those who eat the Lord's supper should be free from evil associations.

The feast of Unleavened Bread, connected with the Passover, was kept for the seven days prescribed by Moses (v. 22). The seven days pictures the complete life of believers, being kept free from any contamination of evil, for we are not to suppose that we are intended to be free from evil just on certain holy days or occasions, but for our entire life. They kept the seven days with joy, and thus our joy is not to be temporary, but continued, as the Lord Jesus says, "that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full." (Jn. 15:11).

It is interesting to observe at the end of Chapter 6 that the Lord had "turned the heart of the King of Assyria toward them." Thus the King of Persia is called also "the King of Babylon" (ch. 5:13) and "the King of Assyria." Persia had conquered Babylon after Babylon had conquered Assyria, so that Persia's king was in authority over Assyria and Babylon.

Ezra was the scribe whom God employed to give the history of these first six chapters, which took place before Ezra came to Jerusalem. Only in Chapter 7 does Ezra introduce himself into the picture.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **7-8. The arrival of Ezra**

#### **7:1-28. Ezra went to Jerusalem**

#### **8:1-36. Ezra's mission**

### **EZRA'S RETURN TO JERUSALEM (vv. 1-10)**

These first ten verses form a brief introduction as to who Ezra was and the fact of his coming to Jerusalem. Details are given after this, verses 11 to 26 quoting a letter given to Ezra by Artaxerxes, king of Persia, in whose heart God had worked to encourage Ezra in returning to Jerusalem; then Chapter 8 listing those who accompanied Ezra and reporting on the details of this journey, the gifts for the temple with which they had been entrusted and their eventual arrival at Jerusalem.

First (in Chapter 7) Ezra gives his genealogy, going back to Aaron through Phineas and Eliezer (vv. 1-5). Thus he was a priest of God through birth. But he was a skilled scribe, which did not come through birth, but through diligently



applying himself to learning the law of Moses (v. 6). This ought to have been true of all the priests (Lev. 10:8-11), though most of them failed in this.

"The king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the Lord his God upon him." How clearly God led Ezra, even preparing the king to favour his return to Jerusalem, for he evidently presented a request to the king concerning this project.

Apparently some of the children of Israel, including priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers and Nethinim, had arrived earlier in the seventh year of Artaxerxes (v. 7), and Ezra did not arrive until the first day of the fifth month, according to the good hand of his God upon him" (vv. 8-9). Verse 10 adds, "For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel" (v. 10). It seems that it is not many in whom God works this preparation of heart, not only to seek the truth of God, but **to do it**, and also to teach it to others. Learning is good, but teaching the truth comes only after obeying it. How can we expect our teaching to be effective if we ourselves are not examples of our teaching?

### **ARTAXERXES' LETTER TO EZRA (vv. 11-26)**

The letter of Artaxerxes to Ezra at this time is quoted in full. It appears that the king knew Ezra well enough (possibly only through reports) that he could have confidence in his being a true servant of God who had wisdom enough to both honour God and honour the king in his project of concern for the house of God in Jerusalem (v. 11).

He refers to himself as "king of kings," for there were kings in the Persian empire who were subject to him (v. 12). But how much more becoming is this title as applied to the Lord Jesus! (Rev. 19:16). However, he addressed Ezra as "a scribe of the law of the God of heaven." It seems he realized that Israel's God was much higher than the idols of Persia.

The king's decree was similar to that of Darius (ch. 1:3) in authorizing any of the people of Israel including priests and Levites who desired to volunteer for it, to go with Ezra to Jerusalem. He also wrote, "Whereas you are being sent by the king and his seven counsellors" (v. 14), that is, because it was by the king's authority, and because they were to carry the silver and gold contributed by the king and his counsellors, and the silver and gold that was given them in all the province of Babylon, freewill offerings given for the house of God in Jerusalem (vv. 15-16), therefore Ezra was instructed to be careful to buy with this money bulls, rams and lambs with grain offerings and drink offerings to be offered on

the altar of the house of God in Jerusalem (v. 17). It is good to see that the king's first priority was that which was for God's honour. All these offerings symbolize Christ in some special way.

Thus, if God was given His place first, the king had confidence that he could depend on Ezra to rightly use the rest of the silver and gold, telling him he could act in this as "seems good to you," and "according to the will of your God" (v. 18). Articles that Ezra was entrusted with for the service of the temple he was to deliver in full before the God of Jerusalem (v. 19).

Furthermore, the king instructed that anything more that might be needed for the furnishing of the temple would be given from the king's treasury (v. 20). This was backed up by a decree addressed to all the treasurers on Israel's side of the River Euphrates that they were to give Ezra whatever he might require, only limiting the silver to 100 talents, the wheat to 100 cors and the wine and oil to 100 baths each, with no limit to the salt (vv.21-22).

It may seem amazing that the King of Persia would decree that "whatever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be diligently done for the house of the God of heaven" (v. 23). We might expect such words from a godly king of Israel; but God knows how to work in the hearts of others outside Israel too. Artaxerxes realized that the God of heaven was in such control that He might make Persia to suffer His wrath if they did not encourage Israel in being obedient to God.

More than this, the king ordered that it would be unlawful to impose tax, tribute or custom on any of the priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, Nethinim or servants of the house of God (v.24). Rehum and Shimshai had urged a previous Artaxerxes to stop the Jews from building by claiming that the Jews would not pay tax, tribute or custom (ch. 4:9-13), but the king now was ready to forego these things for heads of Israel, that Judah would prosper.

Ezra too was credited by the king a shaving God-given wisdom to appoint magistrates and judges in the region west of the River, who were conversant with the laws of God, so as to teach the people (v. 25). Thus, the king recognized that the land of Israel had a special place in the eyes of the God of heaven and earth, and desired that there should be due recognition of God's honour in that country. He rightly realized that it would be beneficial to his entire empire if God were given His place in Israel.

Finally, he instructed that the law of God was to be so fully enforced that anyone who would not observe it and the law of the king (which he regarded secondary

to the law of God) would be exposed to judgment without delay, whether the case demanded death, banishment from Israel, confiscation of property or imprisonment (v. 26). If one's guilt was established beyond question, this is certainly good government, not like so many cases today, being dragged out for months without reason. The policy of the Medes and Persians that their laws could not be changed (Dan. 6:15) did have some merit, though in Daniel's case the law was bad and should never have been passed. But the Persians were not slow in carrying out sentence against law-breakers, and this is commendable.

Verses 27 and 28 record the words of Ezra in expressing his appreciation of the Lord's putting into the king's heart the desire "to beautify the house of the Lord," and also for the Lord's mercy to him in disposing the hearts of the king and his counsellors favourably toward Ezra himself. He considered himself simply the object of God's mercy in his being shown favour by the king and his princes (v. 28). Being thus encouraged by the hand of the Lord upon him, he gathered leading men of Israel to accompany him to Jerusalem.

## **CHAPTER 8**

### **A LIST OF EZRA'S COMPANIONS (vv. 1-14)**

Those who voluntarily came to accompany Ezra to Jerusalem are recorded here, the men numbering almost 1500. Women also must have been present, but are not mentioned. Not that God thinks less of the faith of women, for He often commends them for their devotedness, but since the emphasis here is on publication, and the women do not hold a public place, there was no reason to refer to them. Children too are not mentioned. In fact, the emphasis inverse 1 is on "the heads of their father's houses," showing God's vital interest in households.

### **PRIESTS, LEVITES AND NETHINIM ADDED (vv. 15-20)**

Ezra gathered his company together by the river that flows to Ahava, camping there three days. However, among all these people he found none of the sons of Levi present (v. 15). How sad indeed was this deficiency! -- for their main concern was the temple of God at Jerusalem, and of all people the Levites ought to have been most anxious to return to Jerusalem, for they were rightly temple servants. Were they content to settle down in Babylon, concerned only for their own comfort in the midst of a world at enmity with God? May we not be like them, but be concerned to place God's interests first and be willing to labour for the blessing of His present house, the Church of God.

Ezra was not content to go to Jerusalem without Levites, so he called for a number of leaders among the Jews and commanded them to speak to Iddo, the chief man at the place Casiphia, which must have been a place where Levites and Nethinim had congregated, to tell him that Levites and Nethinim were required for the service of the house of God at Jerusalem.

Ezra must have been held in honor among these people, because his words had such effect as to lead eighteen men of one family and twenty of another family of Levites to respond to this call. But also 220 Nethinim responded. These were temple servants, likely Gentiles of the Gibeonites whom Joshua had put in the place of "woodcutters and water carriers" for the congregation" (Josh. 9:27). While the Levites were temple servants, the Nethinim were employed as helpers of the Levites, and there is every indication that they proved faithful through the years.

### **PRAYER AND FASTING (vv.21-23)**

Even with all the required company now gathered, Ezra was not prepared to leave until they had earnestly sought the blessing and guidance of God. He proclaimed a fast that they might humble themselves before God "to seek the right way for us and our little ones and all our possessions" (v. 21). This was to be a long journey in which they might be exposed to the dangers of being attacked by robbers, of illness or accidents, bad weather or plain weariness. "For," he writes, "I was ashamed to request of the king an escort of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy on the road, because we had spoken to the king, saying, "The hand of our God is upon all those for good who seek Him, but His power and His wrath are against all those who forsake Him" (v. 22). Thus, committing themselves simply to the Lord, they had full confidence their prayer was answered (v. 23).

### **PRIESTS ENTRUSTED WITH COSTLY PROPERTY (vv. 24-30)**

Before leaving also Ezra chose twelve leaders of the priests and ten of their brethren with them to take charge of the silver, gold and other articles that had been offered for the house of God, things given by the king and his counselors as well as by Israelites who were present. These things weighed out to them are detailed in verse 26, -- 650 talents of silver, articles of silver weighing 100 talents, 100 talents of gold, 20 gold basins and two vessels of fine polished bronze, precious as gold. The 100 talents of gold would be worth close to \$800,000. This was no small amount to be entrusted with for a four months journey!

Likely these priests were thoroughly trustworthy men, but it was still necessary to have more than one or two in charge of the property, in order to honor the truth that Paul emphasizes in 2 Corinthians 8:20-23, -- "avoiding this, that anyone should blame us in this lavish gift which is administered by us." Indeed the more honest a man is, the more he should desire to have his actions carefully scrutinized by others. Thus too, those who are trusted to handle money in an assembly should be careful to have the amounts and the disposition of any funds closely checked by others.

Ezra reminded the priests that they themselves were holy to the Lord and that what was entrusted to them was also holy (v. 28). Therefore he tells them, "Watch and keep them until you weight them before the leaders of the priests and heads of the fathers' houses of Israel in Jerusalem, in the chambers of the house of the Lord" (v. 28). What a reminder for every believer today! We are entrusted with the truth of the Word of God, and should take to heart what Paul writes to Timothy, "O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust" (1 Tim. 6:20). Just as the priests were required to give account in Jerusalem of all that was committed to their trust, so we shall give account at the judgment seat of Christ of the way we handled the word of God committed to us.

### **COMING TO JERUSALEM (vv.31-36)**

Only a brief mention is made of the four month trip to Jerusalem, but full credit is given to God for His preserving care in bringing them in safety, for verse 31 indicates that there were enemies along the road. Yet any effort by them to cause trouble was thwarted before it began. On the fourth day after arriving at Jerusalem the silver and gold and all the articles carried there were weighed in the house of God by two priests accompanied by three Levites. How rightly this was done, that everything might be found in proper order. Similarly, at the end of our Christian journey, all our life will be weighed in "the balances of the sanctuary." Do we exercise ourselves to have "a conscience void of offense toward God and men," so that we shall gladly welcome that review? Notice that all the weight was written down at the time (v. 34). So indeed there will be an eternal record of that which has been done in true devotion to the Lord.

Those who returned were children of those taken captive 70 years before, and they offered twelve bulls, 96 rams and 77 lambs as burnt offerings to "the God of Israel," not simply the God of Judah. The twelve bulls were for the twelve tribes of Israel, though all those tribes were not even represented there. Also twelve male goats were added as a sin offering (v. 35), again with the twelve tribes in view. Today also, when God brings about a return of even a small number to recognize the truth of the Assembly of God, we must never lose sight

of the fact that He loves the entire body of Christ, of which we are only a small part. Though it is impossible to have practical fellowship with all the one body, it is only right that we embrace them in our affections. When we break bread (however few we may be), we should always remember that "the bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ"? -- thus recognizing our fellowship with the entire body of Christ, not only those present.

Ezra's company delivered the king's orders to his officials in that area, which the officials honoured by giving support to the Jews and to the work of the temple (v. 36). God in this way was giving special encouragement to His people in the work that was for His honour.

"So we fasted and entreated our God for this, and He answered our prayer" (Ezra 8:23).

## **CHAPTER 9**

### **9-10. Ezra's reform**

#### **9:1-15. Loss of separation**

#### **10:1-44. Separation restored**

### **HUMBLER BECAUSE OF MIXED MARRIAGES (vv. 1-4)**

If Ezra expected to engage in the pleasant work of the priesthood, it must have been a keen disappointment to find soon after his arrival that there was very unpleasant work to do. For the priest's work was not only to offer sacrifices to God. He must deal with failure and sin among the people, and such cases were soon brought to his attention by the leaders (v. 1). They reported that, not only had the common people mixed with the peoples of the land, to practice the abominations (idolatry) of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perezites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites; but the priests and Levites had done so also. This involved even more nations that had been in the land when Israel first came there. Linked with this idolatry they were practicing was the fact that the Jews had taken some women from those nations as wives. Is it not always true that bad associations will lead to a bad attitude toward God? -- that is, idolatry. But Ezra was told that the leaders and rulers had been foremost in this trespass (v. 2). Certainly, if leaders do it, the people will follow, and it is easier to follow a bad example than a good one.

But how good to see the effect this had on Ezra! It caused no bitter anger, no panic, no precipitate actions, but rather a humble, self-judgment expressed in tearing his robe, even plucking out some of the hairs of his beard, and sitting down in deep dismay (v. 3).

This brokenness and humility of the man of God had some serious effect on others who trembled at the words of God, and they assembled to him. If we have any regard for God Himself, His word will certainly make us tremble as we contemplate men's haughty defiance of that word, for a haughty attitude will bring down the awful judgment of the God they defy, and we should desire to see that averted if it is possible.

But Ezra knew how to wait upon God for an answer. His deep distress continued till the time of the evening sacrifice (v. 4). Then he arose, his garment and his robe having been torn, and spread out his hands to pray to the Lord his God.

### **EZRA'S PRAYER (vv. 6-15)**

How different is Ezra's prayer from that of Elijah some years before, when he told God how unfaithful Israel had been while he (Elijah) had alone remained faithful (1 Ki. 19:10). Instead of this Ezra prayed as though he was just as guilty as others of Israel in this sad mixture of the Jews with the nations. He confessed the sin of all just as though it had been his, though he was not personally involved in the sin. He discerned this, that Israel had sinned, and he was part of Israel. As God's priest, he was eating the sin offering (Lev. 6:25-26), which involves feeling before God the seriousness of Israel's sin, in which the priest was to consider himself involved. We see this most strikingly in the words of the Lord Jesus in Psalm 69:5, "O God, You know my foolishness; and my sins are not hidden from You." Certainly the Lord Jesus had no sins of his own, but He took the responsibility on His own shoulders for the sins of Israel, confessed them before God, and in fact bore them "in His own body on the tree" (1 Pet. 2:24).

It is lovely to see this same spirit in Ezra, confessing before God, "O my God, I am too ashamed and humiliated to lift up my face to You, my God; for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has grown up to the heavens (v. 6). In other words, their sin was far beyond their control or their ability to check it. But he does not confine his thoughts to the guilt then present, rather he confesses it had been there "since the days of our fathers" (v. 7). In speaking thus, he remembered that it was such guilt that had led to their

captivity, their kings and priests being delivered into the hands of foreign kings because of this guilt, and brought down to shameful humiliation.

"And now for a little while grace has been shown from the Lord our God to leave us a remnant to escape." Ezra deeply appreciated the great kindness of God in the small measure of recovery He had given His people, though only a remnant. He had given them "a peg" in His holy place, a small support on which to hang their confidence, to have enlightened eyes to discern more clearly the truth of God, to be in some measure revived, though still in bondage. For verse 9 is rightly translated, "we *are* slaves." In spite of this, God had not forsaken them in their bondage, but had extended mercy in the sight of the kings of Persia, that they might at least be lifted in spirit above their circumstances, to have the temple of God repaired and the wall of Jerusalem rebuilt. Does this not show us that, even in a sadly confined state, God is able to provide grace to rightly worship Him (of which the temple speaks) and also to be in some true measure separate from the world (which the wall pictures)?

But now, after God had shown such grace, Ezra says, "We have forsaken Your commandment." God's command to them had been accompanied by His warning to Israel against idolatry and against giving their daughters as wives to the inhabitants of the land they entered (v. 12).

Ezra continued his prayer with the reminder that God had warned Israel against intermarrying with the nations of the land, and even against their seeking the peace of those nations, that is, to make them comfortable in the fact of living together. This is a warning for believers today, not to intermarry with unbelievers and not to make unbelievers feel as though there is no difference between us and them. Today, however, we have a positive gospel to unbelievers, to seek to win them to the Lord, that they may be saved, by which means they may be blessed with the same blessings we have.

After all the disobedience and guilt of Israel, Ezra considered that God had punished them less than their iniquities deserved (v. 13). It was true that God had punished them, but with the purpose of driving them back to Him, not with the mere object of punishing them. Then He had wonderfully delivered them from the rigor of that punishment by restoring them to their land.

After such kindness shown by God, Ezra asks, "should we again break Your commandments and join in marriage with the people committing these abominations? This he realized to be a most ungrateful way of responding to God's grace, and therefore he expected God to intervene in anger, to consume Israel so that no remnant at all would be left (v. 14).



Let us observe that Ezra does not ask for forgiveness of the people, but simply confesses Israel's guilt before the Lord, leaving God to do as He sees fit with them. He declares that God is righteous in having left the few Jews only as a remnant, but because of God's righteousness, no one of the remnant could stand before Him on account of their guilt (v. 15).

## **CHAPTER 10**

### **ACTION FOLLOWING PRAYER (vv. 1-17)**

Ezra expected an answer to his prayer, and God provided the answer immediately in moving a very huge number of men, women and children to gather together before Him, weeping bitterly, for they realized that this was not a matter merely to pray about, but to be faced and settled before God.

One man, Shechaniah, became a spokesman for all, confessing their guilt in having trespassed against God in taking pagan wives. "Yet now," he said, "there is hope in Israel in spite of this" (v. 2). He asked that a covenant be made with God to put away these foreign wives and children born to them, and to let it be done according to the law (v. 3). He therefore encouraged Ezra to rise and act on this advice, since Ezra was in a place of authority, assuring him that he (Shechaniah) and others would back him up. Ezra then rose and required an oath to be sworn that Israel would clear themselves of their evil compromise by putting away their foreign wives and their children (v. 5).

Such an action certainly shows the seriousness of the evil of sinful associations. We must not diminish the seriousness of this, though in our day, under grace, we cannot require the putting away of wives, though they are not saved. The nations Israel was involving themselves with were actually demon worshipers, so that God had absolutely forbidden any marriages with them. Believers today are not under such a law, though they are told, "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers" (2 Cor. 6:14). If they disobey this scripture, they are not told to put away the unbeliever, but rather, "a wife is not to depart from her husband" (1 Cor. 7:10), though "if the unbeliever departs, let him depart" (1 Cor. 7:15). Once the marriage is consummated, the believer is not free before God to leave it except in the case of the partner being unfaithful (Mt. 19:9). Today, a believer who marries an unbeliever must learn by experience the painful results of this disobedience, rather than being relieved of such results.

However, Ezra, still under deep exercise of soul, went apart from the people, into the chamber of Jehohanan, the son of Eliashib the high priest, where he fasted and mourned because of the guilt of the remnant of the captivity (v.6). How good it is too if we seek solitary, protracted exercise of heart before God in connection with any occasion of serious trouble amongst the saints of God. Daniel, when deeply concerned about the low condition of his people Israel, "was mourning three full weeks" (Dan. 10:2).

Then a proclamation was issued and sent to all the descendants of the captivity that they must gather at Jerusalem, this order being accompanied by the warning that one who refused to come would have all his property confiscated and he himself separated from the assembly of the returned remnant (vv. 7-8). Why should this be in the case of those who were not guilty of mixing with the nations? Because all were affected by the evil of even a few, though in this case it was more than a few. But all the people were intended to feel the guilt that Israel had incurred by the evil allowed in their midst, so that it would not be so likely to quickly rise again. We surely must always feel the shame of wrongs committed in our own company, and take sides with God in a proper judgment of them.

Within three days after the proclamation was made, this gathering took place, and even though the people had to sit outside in a heavy rain, there was no delay in facing the matter. The time would correspond to our December or January, so that the weather only increased their trembling over the matter that troubled them.

Ezra then spoke briefly and to the point, "You have transgressed and have taken pagan wives, adding to the guilt of Israel. Now therefore make confession to the Lord God of your fathers, and do His will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land, and from the pagan wives" (vv. 10-11). Perhaps it was Ezra's prayer and self-judgment that kept the people from resisting this order, for generally those who have sunk into evil are stubborn enough to resist any reproof. But God was working, as He always does in response to faith and self-judgment.

All the people answered decisively, "Yes! As you have said, so we must do" (v. 12). How thankful Ezra must have been to hear these words! However, as they say, this work would take time, both because of the weather and because there were many involved in this transgression. They suggest that appointments might be made at stated times for the judging of every case, with judges and elders present, and this suggestion was accepted in spite of some apparently disagreeing (v. 15).

The most responsible for this guilt are mentioned first, priests, the sons of Jeshua (v. 18), and then other priests (vv. 20-22). Jeshua had been identified with Zerubbabel in building the house of God (Hag. 2:2-4), and for his sons to fall into the snare of the enemy was deeply serious, for this provided a bad example for others. When they gave their promise to put away their strange wives, they presented a ram as a trespass offering. Whenever we have been guilty of any sin, we must be reminded that Christ is "the propitiation for our sins" (1 Jn.2:1-2). If we think seriously of the agony He suffered on account of our sins, are we likely to carelessly slip back into sin again? Thus, self-judgment should be real, and full.

Levites are spoken of in verse 23, and singers in verse 24, then others of the people in verses 25-43. Thus we are reminded that, however greatly we may be blessed, none of God's people are automatically exempt from being tested by the seductions of the enemy.

Thus, every one of these unequal yokes had to be broken, regardless of what either party felt about it. This was under law. Under grace today, if one should find himself in an unequal yoke, the general principle is that he should leave it if he can do so without injustice toward the other party. Supposing it is a business yoke, if a believer has committed himself to a contract, he may find the only right way to break the contract is to buy himself out of it, which he should do if possible. It is not so easy as this in marriage, for scripture tells the believer, "a wife is not to depart from her husband" (1 Cor. 7:10). For under grace, "the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband? Or how to you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?" (1 Cor. 7:16). How thankful we ought to be that we are living under grace rather than under law!

Is it not striking that the only work recorded on Ezra's part in returning to the land is that of dealing with the unfaithfulness of the people? This should deeply impress us with the fact of God's abhorrence of bad associations on the part of His beloved people. But the faithfulness of Ezra is beautifully commendable.

Following this, it seems that Ezra faded into the background, at least not having an outstanding place in the history of the returned remnant of Israel, though, being a scribe, he is seen in Nehemiah 8:1-6 reading to the Jews from the Book of the Law of Moses. Though the Lord had pressed him into a most forward position for the purpose of purifying Judah from the corruption into which they had fallen, there was no ambition on Ezra's part to take a prominent place in the government of the nation. This is a lovely contrast to the attitude of the disciples of the the Lord Jesus when they disputed among themselves as to who should be

greatest (Lk. 22:24). We have much to learn from the character of this devoted servant of the Lord. Indeed, the Lord's disciples had far more reason to be humble and self-effacing than Ezra had, for they had companied with the Lord Jesus Himself and had seen this marvellous lowly character manifested in all His ways. Ezra had not had this wonderful advantage, but he had learned well in the presence of God.

There can be no doubt that the most significant reason for the writing of this book of Ezra is to deeply impress on believers the seriousness of the question of our associations. This is particularly necessary ministry for our present day, at the end of the dispensation of grace, when the enemy of our souls is trying every artifice to involve believers in the schemes of unbelievers and to mix believers and unbelievers so that no clear difference can be seen between them. May we take these things deeply to heart, that we may rightly honour our blessed Lord.



*City walls, Jerusalem*

## NEHEMIAH

Nehemiah 1-3	Nehemiah, Cupbearer to the King
Nehemiah 4-6	Patience With A Purpose and A Plan
Nehemiah 7-8	The Joy of the LORD is <i>My</i> Strength
Nehemiah 9-10	Worshiping the LORD's Mercy and Justice - With Facts
Nehemiah 11-13	The Revival and Post-Revival Cleanup

**PROMISE:** "Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.'" (1:8-9)

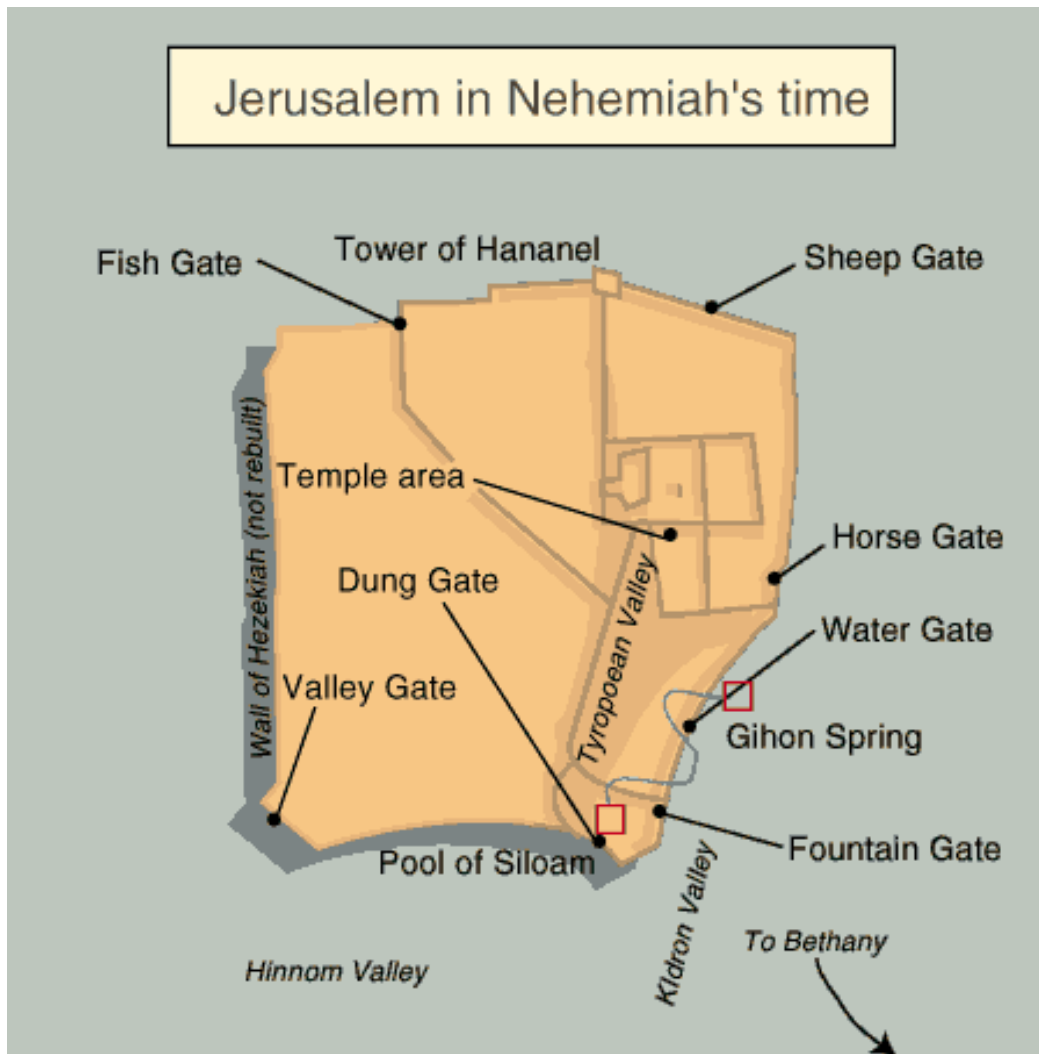
**Timeline of Persia** (See also above) **538 BC** - **Cyrus II** ruled Persia (ca 550-530 BC) and defeated Babylonian empire - Zerubbabel authorized to lead first group back to Israel to rebuild the temple (prophets: Haggai and Zechariah) | **521 BC** - **Darius** ruled Persia (521-486 BC) | **479 BC** - **Xerxes I** ruled Persia (486-465 BC) - Esther became his queen | **457 BC** - **Artaxerxes I** ruled Persia (464-424 BC) - Ezra authorized to lead group to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple | **444 BC** - **Artaxerxes I** ruling Persia - Nehemiah authorized to lead group to rebuild Jerusalem wall

The political situation in Babylon had changed, with Persia taking over the Babylonian empire. Some of the Israelite exiles had already returned to Jerusalem, but others still in exile had jobs of great responsibility. This included Queen Esther, who was the wife of Xerxes (King of Persia from 486-465 BC) before Ezra returned to Jerusalem, and Nehemiah, who was cupbearer to King Artaxerxes I of Persia. It was not automatic that the Israelites who wanted to go back to their homeland were released from exile. Nehemiah got news that Jerusalem was in extremely poor condition, and he wept, mourned, fasted, and prayed to the LORD, God of heaven.

Later, back at work, the king and queen noticed Nehemiah's sadness. Hearing the problem, the king made arrangements with Nehemiah that he could go rebuild Jerusalem in a set amount of time. Then he was to return to the king.

So Nehemiah went to Jerusalem and began his inspections at night. With opposition from an Horonite, an Ammonite, and an Arab, Nehemiah answered

them ("you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it") and laid out his plan in private before the Jews, priests, nobles, and officials who would do the work. Eliashib the high priest and other priests began repairing the gates and the wall around Jerusalem.



### ***Jerusalem under Nehemiah (444 BC)***

*The Jerusalem wall is another name given to the outer wall of the Old city of Jerusalem. It also sometimes refers to the Western Wall, or Wailing Wall, which is by the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem old City wall was built around 1535 AD by the Ottoman rule in the Holy Land and circle the Old City with over 4 Kilometers of Jerusalem stone wall. In 1981 the Old City and the Jerusalem wall were added included in the prestigious UNESCO world heritage sites list. The walls are accessible and tours can be taken along the wall. At night the Jerusalem walls are lit with special lighting which eliminated the entire city of Jerusalem and makes for a spectacular and majestic view.*

# **COMMENTARY ON THE BOOK NEHEMIAH**

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **1-2. Nehemiah's call**

#### **1:1-11. Nehemiah's concern for Jerusalem**

#### **2:1-20. Nehemiah's mission**

### **MOVED BY THE REPORTED CONDITION OF JERUSALEM**

Though verse 1 makes it clear that this whole book records "the words of Nehemiah," it may be that Nehemiah spoke these words to another person, who wrote them down, -- possibly Ezra, who was a scribe. It was in the 20th year of Artaxerxes (see ch. 2:1) that Nehemiah received news of Jerusalem from Hanani, who had come to Shushan the palace, where Nehemiah was employed. "Shushan (or Susa) was originally the capital of Elam; afterwards it was incorporated into the kingdom of Babylon, and finally, on the conquest of Babylon by Cyrus, it passed into the possession of Persia, of which it seems, at the time of Nehemiah, to have been the metropolis" (Nehemiah by Edward Dennett -- ch. 1, footnote). Thus Nehemiah did not go from Babylon to Jerusalem, as Ezra did, but from Shushan.

Nehemiah, deeply concerned of conditions in Jerusalem, inquired about this matter (v. 2), and was told, "The survivors who are left from the captivity in the province are there in great distress and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem is also broken down, and its gates are burned with fire" (v. 3).

Hearing such news, Nehemiah sat down, wept and mourned for many days, with fasting and prayer. Likely this exercise was interrupted by his daily work, but it was certainly the most important matter that engaged his thoughts. Notice his mention of "praying before the God of heaven." He does not say "the God of heaven and earth" (v. 4), for Israel's earthly possession had been badly desolated, and there remained little clear evidence that God was caring for His people. Yet God was still in heaven and His power could be relied on to intervene in some blessing for Israel in spite of the low spiritual condition that had caused their current distress.

Nehemiah then in prayer appealed to the God of heaven as "the great and awesome God," and the One who keeps his covenant and mercy, though Israel had badly broken that covenant. He adds the words, "and mercy " for certainly Israel desperately needed mercy (v. 5). However, he says, God keeps His

covenant and mercy with those who love Him and observe His commandments. Those who do not do this have forfeited all claim to His covenant, and can hardly expect His mercy. Nehemiah does not go so far as to say, "keep his commandments," but "observe," for he had no doubt learned that to absolutely keep all God's commandments is too hard for man, but it was still necessary to respect and honour them.

He entreats God to hear his prayer for the children of Israel and to hear his confession of the sins of the children of Israel. Notice, he is not only confessing his own part in these sins, but confessing Israel's sins as though they had been his own sins, and adding, "both my father's house and I have sinned" (v. 6). But he goes further, saying, "We have acted very corruptly against You, and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses" (v. 7).

Nehemiah then proceeded to ask God to remember the words He had spoken to Moses that if Israel was unfaithful He would scatter them among the nations (v.8), but if returning to Him to keep His commandments, God would still gather them back (at least some of them) and bring them to the place where He had set His name (v. 9). These things were plainly spoken by God to Moses in Deuteronomy 4:25-31.

In this prayer of Nehemiah he fully acknowledged and appreciated the fact that God had kept His word in bringing back the remnant of the Jews to Jerusalem; but he feared that the Jews were lapsing again into an unfaithful state, even after God had redeemed them by His great power. But Nehemiah intended to act: he would not only pray and leave it there, nor did he pray that God would send someone to Jerusalem to help the suffering remnant. Since he knew and felt the sorrow of their condition, he considered he was the man to go. He did solicit the approval and help of others, but simply asked God to give him favor "in the sight of this man" (v. 11). Though Artaxerxes was king, yet Nehemiah considered him simply a man in whose heart God could work as easily as in any man. "For," he says, "I was the king's cupbearer." This was an honoured and trusted position, and the more trusted, the less likely would the king be to give him a long leave of absence.

## **CHAPTER 2**

This exercise of Nehemiah continued for four months following the information he received, and finally came to a head in the month Nisan (corresponding to March or April), when Nehemiah was serving wine to the king and the king observed that his face was sad (v. 1). When the king asked him why he was



sad, he became dreadfully afraid, for one to appear to be sad in the presence of the king might be considered a mortal offense, and a proud king may have condemned to death such a person.

However, Artaxerxes was not so arrogant a man, but kindly considerate, and when Nehemiah told him, "Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs lies waste, and its gates burned with fire?" (v. 3), this immediately awakened the king's sympathies. He knew well what Nehemiah was talking about, for he himself had authorized Ezra to go to Jerusalem with the object of furnishing the temple. More than this, God was answering the prayer of Nehemiah, though he had waited for some time for the answer. We too may have to wait for answers, but waiting on God is an exercise necessary to strengthen our faith.

It must have been a surprise to Nehemiah to have the king ask him, "What do you request?" (v. 4). Immediately Nehemiah prayed a short, involuntary prayer (of course not audibly), and made his request, "If it please the king and if your servant has found favour in your sight, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it" (v. 5). The king made no objection to this, though he asked how long Nehemiah would require for this project, for he wanted him to return. Nehemiah set him a time, though we are not told what it was, nor does Nehemiah record anything of his later return to Shushan. The wall was rebuilt in the short space of 52 days, however (ch. 6:15). How long after this Nehemiah remained in Jerusalem we are not told.

When Nehemiah saw that the king was favourable to him, he was emboldened to ask that the king would give him letters to the authorities in the territories through which he would pass, and also "a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he must give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel which pertains to the temple, for the city wall, and for the house that I will occupy" (v. 8). It is good to see that Nehemiah realized that the king's approval of this was due to "the good hand of my God upon me."

The king also sent an escort of army captains and horsemen with Nehemiah (v. 9). It is not recorded that Nehemiah asked for this. Ezra before him says, "I was ashamed to request of the king an escort of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy on the road, because we had spoken to the king, saying, 'The hand of our God is upon all those for good who seek Him'" (Ezra 8:22). But since Nehemiah was given this escort without requesting it, then it would have been unseemly for him to refuse it. No doubt he regarded this as connected with the Lord's promise for his protection. Likely he took less time for his journey

than Ezra did, who had a large company with him; also the soldiers and horsemen would be able to travel more swiftly.

Immediately Nehemiah arrived at Jerusalem, however, there was a threat of opposition, for we read that Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official "were deeply disturbed that a man had come to seek the well-being of the children of Israel" (v. 10). These enemies of God were anxious to keep Israel in a state of misery, just as Satan desires to keep believers from enjoying the blessing of the Lord.

### **NEHEMIAH INSPECTS THE WALLS (vv. 11-16)**

It was three days before Nehemiah began the labor he had come for. He would require some rest after so long a journey, and it is important for us too to cultivate a restful spirit before embarking on any service for the Lord. Also, he did not begin publicly. By night he took only a few men with him to view the walls and gates of the city, not telling any of the officials of the city what he was doing (vv. 12-16). But he was concerned to find precisely what would be necessary in the project before him.

In Nehemiah's inspection of the walls and gates of Jerusalem, he found that the report he had heard was correct: the walls were broken down and the gates burned with fire. What a picture of the wall of separation between believers and unbelievers being broken down, and the principles of truth such as are seen in the gates (to allow in what should be in and to keep out what should be out) burned, that is, wilfully destroyed! Do we see such things in professing Christendom today? Sadly, it is true practically everywhere! Can we repair these walls and gates? Certainly not in all of Christendom; but we can do so in whatever small sphere of responsibility the Lord may give to us.

### **ENCOURAGED AND RESPONSIVE (vv. 17-20).**

Receiving the knowledge he had, Nehemiah did not delay to urge the city officials that the walls should be immediately rebuilt. They knew the conditions that existed, and he encouraged them by telling them, "Come and let us build the wall of Jerusalem." He would be fully with them in this worthy endeavour. He told them also of God's good hand upon him in the concern God had put in his heart, and also in the favourable words of the king to him encouraging this work. The Lord had also prepared the officials, for they responded, "Let us rise up and build" (v. 18), and "set their hands to this good work." How good it is when the saints of God are prepared to act upon God's word delivered by a true servant of God.

However, this spirit of obedience to God awakened further enmity in the forces of Satan. Sanballat and Tobiah were joined by another man, Geshem the Arab, this time not only expressing feigned sorrow, but mocking and despising the Jews for doing work like this (v. 19). They even accused them of rebelling against the king, a totally false accusation, for the king had encouraged the building of the wall. But Satan will resort to every kind of falsehood to gain his own ends.

Nehemiah did not, however, appeal to the fact of the king's approval, but went higher than the king to answer them, "The God of heaven Himself will prosper us: therefore we His servants will arise and build, but you have no heritage or right or memorial in Jerusalem" (v. 20). Thus the enemy was put to silence for the time being.



*Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. Here a great number of disabled people used to lie (John 5: 2-3)*



*The Sheep Gate (Jerusalem)*

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **3. Jerusalem's gates and walls repaired**

#### **Verses 1-2. Builders of the sheep gate**

#### **Verses 3-32. Builders of the other gates**

#### **THE BUILDING WELL BEGUN (vv. 1-32)**

Eliashib the high priest is mentioned first in the building, not because he was the most devoted builder, but because of his position, for chapter 13:4 tells us that he had been allied with Tobiah, and also (ch. 13:28) that one of his sons was married to the daughter of Sanballat. Besides this, though Eliashib and his brethren built the sheepgate, it was a different man, Meremoth, who repaired the wall "from the door of the house of Eliashib to the end of the house of Eliashib" (v. 21). What a lesson is seen here! A man may be concerned to repair in measure the public character of Christianity, but have little concern for the wall of separation in his family life!

More than this, though it is said they "built the sheep gate; they consecrated it and hung its doors" (v. 1), yet no mention is made of including "its bolts and bars", as is the case with others who built gates (vv. 3,6,13,14,15). Does this not indicate that Eliashib was not so careful about full separation from the world,

but would allow some measure of laxity in this matter? When a leader is like this, how sadly this can affect the entire testimony of God! Nevertheless, scripture credits Eliashib with what good he actually did.

All those who laboured in this good work are listed by name, just as in Romans 16 the Lord takes pleasure in recording the faith and labour of many individuals, such as Priscilla and Aquila who risked their own necks for Paul's life (vv. 3-4), "Mary, who laboured much" (v. 6), "Persis who laboured much in the Lord" (v. 12). Thus, some stood out specially, others only recorded, but all recognized. The judgment seat of Christ will reveal the work of **all** believers, and some will be rewarded more than others.

In verse 5 the Tekoites are mentioned as making repairs, but "their nobles did not put their shoulders to the work of the Lord." Did they consider such work to be beneath their dignity? In contrast to this, one of the goldsmiths and one of the perfumers did this manual labour to which they were not accustomed. How good it is that the Lord takes full account of all these things! Verse 12 tells us that not only Shallum, a leader of the half district of Jerusalem, worked in repairing, but also his daughters. Does this not remind us of Paul's words concerning "the women who laboured with me in the Gospel" (Phil. 4:3)? The word of God too takes note of Baruch who "carefully" repaired another section. No doubt some were not as careful as others in the work, but the Lord values true diligence in whatever He give us to do, as is surely indicated in Colossians 3:23, "Whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men." If the Lord Jesus is the Object in whatever work we are called upon to do, would we think of being anything less than wholehearted?

A number of the inhabitants of Jerusalem are said to have made repairs in front of their own houses (vv. 23,28,29,30). This is a reminder of 1 Timothy 3:5, "For if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God? It is true, on the other hand, that some Christians are concerned only for their personal and their family responsibilities, and ignore the proper welfare of the church of God. We have noticed, in contrast to this, that Eliashib repaired the sheep gate, but did not make repairs at his own house. How important it is for us to have a well balanced concern for the spiritual blessing of our own families and at the same time for the true prospering of the assembly of God!

In verse 31 we read again of a goldsmith working, and in verse 32 of both goldsmiths and merchants taking part in the work. Often it is the poor who engage in the work of the Lord (James 2:5), so that it is the more refreshing when those of means are willing to labour for the Lord.



## CHAPTER 4

### 4-5. Opposition to the work

#### 4:1-9. Opposition by ridicule and anger

#### 4: 10-23. Opposition by discouragement.

#### 5:1-19. Opposition by selfishness

### DECISION IN THE FACE OF OPPOSITION (vv. 1-23)

The diligent labour of the Jews drew out more bitter anger on the part of the enemy. Sanballat was furious and resorted to the moral weakness of mockery, speaking contemptuously of "these feeble Jews" (vv. 1-2). "Will they fortify themselves?" he asked. His very attitude showed that it was necessary for them to fortify themselves against him! Also, "Will they offer sacrifices?" In other words, he did not want them to honour God by sacrificing to Him. "Will they complete it in a day?" He feared the energy with which they were working. "Will they revive the stones from the heaps of rubbish?" Can they possibly repair the wall after its being so demolished by the enemy? If Sanballat thought this was too ambitious a project, he would soon find out the answer. All these questions are too frequently asked by opposers of the work of God when believers seek to return to God's principles of truth in connection with the church of God.

Tobiah continued the same hateful ridicule by say, "Whatever they build, if even a fox goes up on it, he will break down their stone wall." Very well: Tobiah was a fox: Let him try to break down the wall! But how good it is to hear the involuntary prayer of Nehemiah, "Hear, O God, for we are despised; turn their reproach on their own heads, and give them as plunder to a land of captivity!" (v. 4). He added, "Do not let their sin be blotted out from before You, for they have provoked You to anger before the builders: (v.5). Where there is true repentance before God, sins **will** be blotted out (Isa. 43:25), just as Israel will learn at the end of their Great Tribulation, but these men knew nothing of repentance, for they instead provoked the Lord to anger by their persecution of His servants. Nehemiah did not speak of how badly **he himself** felt, but of how God had been provoked to anger.

God's answer to this short prayer is seen in verse 6, "So we built the wall." Opposition did not stop the work: in fact, "the people had mind to work." May we too be stirred to continue in the work of the Lord in spite of whatever opposition. At such times too God gives special grace.

When the wall had been joined together up to half its height, Sanballat and Tobiah, together with Arabs, Ammonites and Ashdodites became very angry (v. 9). They had tried mockery and ridicule, but were frustrated in this. Therefore they conspired to attack Jerusalem in order to spread confusion among the builders (v. 8). But the Jews were aware of this determined conspiracy, and first prayed to God, then set a watch against them day and night (v. 9). This was certainly the right order of action. They did not panic and think of attacking the enemy, but rather depended on God and were watchful against the enemy, and God protected them.

However, not only was the opposition of the enemy a trial to them, but their labor was hindered by the fact of much rubbish being in their way. This was no doubt caused by the residue of the former broken down wall. The strength of the laborers was failing in the face of so monumental a task of clearing away the rubbish. In Christian profession today, there is much rubbish too, the rubbish of much false teaching, and it is no easy task to remove such rubbish so that people may be freed from weary confusion. Though some are truly burden bearers, the labor of this becomes so heavy as to take away strength. Well indeed do we need the exhortation, "let us not grow weary in doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart" (Gal. 6:9).

Nehemiah also knew that their enemies were plotting, "They will neither know nor see anything, till we come into the midst and kill them and cause the work to cease" (v. 11). Nehemiah had Jewish informers who lived near these adversaries, who warned Nehemiah ten times that these enemies intended to attack them in spite of their precautions (v. 12). Therefore Nehemiah positioned men with armaments behind the lower parts of the wall and at the openings. These were prepared for conflict with swords, spears and bows (v. 13). May we be willing labourers in the work of God, and at the same time prepared for spiritual conflict.

In the Church of God today we also ought to be prepared for conflict, but "The weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:4-5). If we are prepared with such weapons which involve obedience to the Word of God, we may find the battle is already won, as did the workers on the wall.

For Nehemiah had spoken plainly, "Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, great and awesome, and fight for your brethren, your sons, your daughters, your wives and your houses" (v. 14). Having the Lord with them, though being

prepared to fight, they were not required to do so. Believers today may well experience the same thing. If they are prepared through study of scripture to watch against the subtleties of the enemy, Satan will be afraid to attack, for he would find himself facing the Lord rather than facing a weak believer. Satan wants to catch us off guard, not having our confidence firmly in the Lord: otherwise he knows he can do no damage. When the adversaries found that the Jews knew of their plotting, they could do nothing (v. 15). If we are ignorant of Satan's devices he will take advantage of us, but if we are on proper guard against those devices we shall be protected by the Lord (2 Cor. 2:11).

Special plans had been made at that time, with half of Nehemiah's servants working on the wall and half being armed with spears, shields and bows, also having armour (v. 16). The leaders are mentioned as being "behind all the house of Judah," possibly to back up and encourage the work and the watchfulness of the guard. Both the builders and the burden bearers are said to have worked with one hand and carried a weapon in the other (v. 17). This is perhaps further explained in verse 18 as not literally always carrying the sword in the hand, but having it girded on his side, where he could easily use it if necessary.

Beside Nehemiah was one who sounded the trumpet. It was priests who did this service (Num. 10:8). If warfare impended, they were to sound an alarm (Num. 10:9). In this case it would be Nehemiah who gave orders to the trumpeter, for Nehemiah is a type of Christ, the Leader. He gave the reason for having the trumpeter with him, "The work is great and extensive, and we are separated far from one another on the wall. Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us" (vv. 19-20). How good that he insists on this confidence in God!

Thus, the opposition did not succeed in hindering the work of God. The laborers continued their work from the break of day until the stars appeared at night (v. 21). This is a reminder of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 16:9, "For a great and effective door has opened to me, and there are many adversaries." He does not say, "**but** there are many adversaries," as though this might excuse him from persisting in the work, but simply "and there are many adversaries," therefore it was the more important to have his whole heart in the service of God.

Nehemiah gave orders too that the workers and servants were to stay at night inside the walls of Jerusalem, thereby serving the purpose of guard duty at night as well as working by day (v. 22). This concerted concentration on the work of the Lord continued till the wall was built. What an example for believers today, who might take to heart the exhortation of 1 Corinthians 15:58, "Therefore, my



beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labour is not in vain in the Lord."

As to Nehemiah himself and his special servants and the men of the guard who attended him (not all the workers), they did not take off their clothes even for sleeping, though the one exception was for when they washed themselves. However busy we may be in the Lord's work, we must never neglect "the washing of water by the Word," for occupation with the work itself will cause some defilement which must be washed away by the application of the Word of God.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **THE GREED OF RULERS REBUKED (vv. 1-13)**

At a time when many were labouring unselfishly for the Lord, it is distressing to hear that others, and in fact those who were nobles and rulers, were guilty of oppressing the poor. This was brought to Nehemiah's attention by a great outcry of the people and their wives against their Jewish brethren (v. 1). There were many who had been reduced to poverty to the point of hunger for food (v. 2). Some also had mortgaged their lands and vineyards and houses in order to buy grain (v. 3). Others had borrowed money to pay tax on their lands and vineyards. It is evident too that the mortgages and borrowed money were subject to interest. This was plain disobedience to the law of God, which said, "If you lend money to any of My people who are poor among you, you shall not be like a moneylender to him: you shall not charge him interest" (Ex. 22:25).

If the Jews under law were forbidden to charge interest in lending to another poor Israelite, now that we are under grace, should we ignore such instruction? Rather, under grace we might go much further, by giving instead of lending.

These oppressed people made a perfectly right appeal, "Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children; and indeed we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been brought into slavery. It is not in our power to redeem them, for other men have our lands and our vineyards" (v. 5). How dreadfully pathetic a situation! The rich were taking advantage of the poverty of others, to make them sink deeper into poverty. Does this ever occur in Christian civilization? Sadly, yes! There are those who so set their minds on wealth that they do not hesitate to make others suffer. The very suggestion of greed (accompanied by deceit) was solemnly judged at the beginning of the dispensation of grace, when Ananias and Saphira were put to death by God for this sin (Acts 5:1-10), even though this

was not the sin of oppressing others. Let us judge our selfish motives in the light of the cross of Christ, where He has in total unselfishness given Himself for us!

Nehemiah was righteously very angry in hearing this cry of oppression (v. 6), but there was no one whose help he could enlist in combating the evil because the nobles and rulers themselves were the offenders. He therefore, in the energy of personal faith in the Lord, firmly rebuked the nobles and rulers, telling them they were guilty of exacting interest from their own brethren. He called a great assembly, to have these matters publicly faced (v. 7).

In speaking to the whole gathering Nehemiah reminded them that, according to the ability God had granted them, they had redeemed their Jewish brethren out of bondage to the nations. This involved proper care and grace toward their brethren. "Now indeed," he demanded, "will you even sell your brethren? Or should they be sold to us?" Should the rich in Israel now be content to see those sold back into slavery whom they had before been gracious enough to redeem from slavery?

These words of Nehemiah may remind us of Paul's words publicly to Peter when Peter and other leaders had shown partiality to Jewish believers in contrast to Gentile believers (Gal. 2:11-16). Paul did not first seek someone else to agree with him, but spoke directly to Peter before all, for he was a true prophet, speaking on God's behalf. Just as Peter could not reply to Paul, so the nobles and rulers in Jerusalem had nothing to say in answer to Nehemiah's faithful words (v. 8).

There was another reason for them to consider that their actions were not good. Their enemies were watching them, and for them to see that the poor of Israel were oppressed by the rich would give cause for their reproach and ridicule (v. 9). Are we also not concerned about what the world around us sees in our testimony? Timothy was told not only to separate from a mixture of believers and unbelievers, but to "flee also youthful lusts" (2 Tim. 2:21-22), which surely includes the greed for monetary gain. Unbelievers will certainly be watching to see what our attitude is in this matter. Nehemiah added that he also and his servants were lending the people money, and though he certainly was not charging interest, he linked himself with all the money-lenders in urging, "Please, let **us** stop this usury!" (v. 10).

Not only did he urge them to cease charging interest, but to make this matter retroactive, that is, to restore immediately the vineyards, olive groves and houses and the 100th part of the money and grain, wine and oil that they had charged the people. What could the nobles and rulers do but respond as they did, "We

will restore it, and will require nothing from them: we will do as you say" (v. 12). If they had not responded this way, they would be guilty of defying the law of God. But Nehemiah was not going to drop the matter there. He called the priests and in their presence required an oath from the nobles and rulers that they would do as they promised. Nehemiah knew that even a ruler could adroitly slip out of a promise if he is not held to it. Thus the priests were witnesses to this oath and authorized to see that it was kept.

Then Nehemiah shook out the fold of his garments and said, "So may God shake out each man from his house, and from his property, who does not perform this promise" (v. 13). At this, all the assembly responded, "Amen!" and praised the Lord. Then it is simply said, "The people did according to this promise." How long the process of restoring took we are not told, but the decisive action of Nehemiah was affective.

### **THE EXAMPLE OF NEHEMIAH (vv. 14-19)**

In contrast to the way the nobles and rulers had acted, these last verses of chapter 5 show the unselfish attitude of Nehemiah for the 12 years he had been appointed governor. We may think his words sound a little too much like pride of his own character, but we must remember that this is scripture: God required him to write as he did. Compare 2 Corinthians 11.

Nehemiah writes that for 12 years neither he nor his brothers accepted provisions that were generally given to governors, though the former governors had required from the people bread and wine and money. In fact, even the servants of the governors considered themselves entitled to the support of the people. But Nehemiah writes that he did not do this "because of the fear of God" (v. 15). This reminds us of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 9:14-15, "Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel. But I have used none of these things, nor have I written these things that it should be done so to me." This thorough unselfishness for Christ's sake is beautiful to witness.

Also neither Nehemiah or his servants bought any land by which to make a profit, though this would have been fully within their rights. They solely occupied themselves with the work of the Lord (v. 16). However, Nehemiah must have been a man of substantial means, for he provided food for 150 Jews and rulers as well as for visitors who came from the nations around them! (v. 17). Having been the king's cup bearer, his salary would have been large, of course, but to minister a household provision of one ox and six sheep every day for 12 years, plus fowl and abundance of wine, seems nothing short of amazing

(v. 18). We might wonder, was the king continuing to pay Nehemiah his salary all this length of time?

He tells us that the reason he did not demand the provisions due to his governor's position was that the bondage was heavy on the Jews. He desired to ease this as he could. We must remember too that Nehemiah was still under law, when he wrote, "Remember me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people" (v. 19). Under grace Paul does not ask to be remembered, for God has remembered all believers in saving them for eternity, and we may have full confidence that He will not forget any work that has been done for Him. Therefore Paul writes in 2 Timothy 4:7-8, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that day, and not to me only but also to all who love His appearing."

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **6. The walls completed**

**Verses 1-14. Opposition by craftiness**

**Verses 15-19. Wall completed**

### **FURTHER SUBTLE OPPOSITION (vv. 1-14)**

Chapter 5 has been practically a parenthesis in this book, for Nehemiah had to delay the building of the wall in order to deal with serious problems inside. However, this did not take a protracted period of time, for Nehemiah was firm and decisive in acting promptly for the Lord.

Since the enemy had been repulsed in their efforts to stop the work of the Lord, they resorted to a more deceitful way of accomplishing their ends. They were alarmed by the fact of the wall having been rebuilt, though at that time the doors in the gates had not been hung (v. 1). Sanballat and Gesham sent a message (purporting to be friendly) to Nehemiah asking him to meet with them outside the city in one of the villages in the plain of Ono. But Nehemiah was discerning enough to realize they wanted to draw him away from his own territory to do him harm. He replied, "O, no!" --sending messengers back to them to tell them he had important work to do and would not leave that work to have a useless interview with God's enemies (v. 3).

But the enemies of God were persistent: they sent the same message four times, and four times Nehemiah answered them in the same way. The fifth time they sent an open letter (open because they wanted this to become a public issue), saying "It is reported among the nations, and Gesham says, that you and the Jews plan to rebel: therefore, according to these rumors, you are rebuilding the wall, that you may be their king. And you have also appointed prophets to proclaim concerning you at Jerusalem, saying, 'There is a king in Judah!' Now these matters will be reported to the king. So come, therefore, and let us consult together" (vv. 6-7).

Nehemiah was certainly not deceived by this. In fact, if such charges were true, what reason would there be for consulting together? Sanballat in this case should report the matter to the king, presenting a clear witness to the truth of his charge, but he had no such witness. The answer from Nehemiah was therefore precise and clear, "No such things as you say are being done, but you invent them in your own heart" (v. 8). Thus Nehemiah refused to be enticed by these men. Satan's method is always to draw us off the basis of faith in the living God. In this case Nehemiah realized their object was to make the people of God afraid of possible recriminations by the authorities, but fear is not faith. If Sanballat could entice Nehemiah to consult with him, even the Jews would conclude that Nehemiah was afraid, and their confidence in a man of faith would be shaken. Let us not fear any kind of threat if we are doing what the Lord has sent us to do. In contrast to having their hands weakened in the work, Nehemiah made another short, involuntary prayer, "Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands" (v. 9). Thus, the opposition served to drive Nehemiah into the presence of the Lord to find additional strength.

Now another subtle snare was laid for Nehemiah, though it was not apparent as such at first, as of course no snare is. He went to visit Shemiah, who was "shut up," evidently confined for some reason (NASB). Speaking to Nehemiah as though in friendship, he urged him to go with him to the house of God and close the doors, warning him that "they" were coming to kill Nehemiah. Whom did he mean by "they"?

However, faith is the victory that overcomes the world" (1 Jn. 5:4), and faith is foremost in Nehemiah's reply, "Should such a man as I flee? And who is there such as I who would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in!" (v. 11). David shows the same faith in Psalm 11:1, "In the Lord I put my trust; how can you say to my soul, Flee as a bird to your mountain?"

Immediately, when Nehemiah expressed this firmness of faith, the Lord gave him discernment to perceive that Shemiah's message was not from God, but

rather that Tobiah and Sanballat had hired Shemiah to seek to frighten Nehemiah (vv. 12-13). Such was their wickedness that they wanted to be able to report to the people that Nehemiah was fearful of imagined danger, and therefore was unfit to be a leader. But Nehemiah had "the shield of faith" which always quenches the fiery darts of the wicked one (Eph. 6:16).

Another brief prayer of Nehemiah is recorded in verse 14, "My God, remember Tobiah and Sanballat, according to their works, and the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who would have made me afraid." Tobiah and Sanballat had evidently employed Noadiah a prophetess and other prophets to help in their evil work, by giving advice that was satanic. How terrible is the deceit that claims to be speaking for God while giving messages from Satan! Are there such prophets today? Sad to say, Yes! They can speak in the most subtle way, though not realizing how deceitful they are, for Satan deludes them into thinking they are wise.

### **THE WALL COMPLETED (vv. 15-19)**

The faith of Nehemiah was wonderfully rewarded in the fact that the building of the wall was completed in 52 days. The determined opposition of the enemies was totally defeated, so that they could not but realize that this work was done by God (v. 16). Why were they disheartened then? Because they were enemies of God, though they would not have said they were. If God does a work, every creature of God ought to be thankful for it: if not, they declare themselves as His enemies.

At the same time, however, Nehemiah had cause for deep distress because the nobles of Judah wanted to maintain friendly relations with Tobiah in frequent correspondence. Why did they do this? Evidently Tobiah had a strong, persuasive character, and by marriage had identified himself with some in Jerusalem who therefore felt favourable toward him. He was an Ammonite, so that the Word of God allowed him no part in Israel whatever, but he apparently wanted to worm his way into the politics of Judah, and the nobles were far too compromising in the matter. They also reported Tobiah's good deeds to Nehemiah and reported Nehemiah's words to Tobiah. How sad it is that they were so deceived as to not recognize Tobiah as the enemy that he was! But similar things happen among the saints of God today. How important it is that we take to heart the words of Ephesians 6:11, "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil." Tobiah continued to send letters to Nehemiah with the object of putting him in fear. Did the nobles think these were good deeds?

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **7. Register of Zerubbabel's return**

#### **Verses 1-4. Provisions for the defence of the city**

#### **Verses 5-73. The census of the first return**

#### **APPOINTMENTS MADE IN THE CITY (vv. 1-3)**

The wall of separation having been built and the doors hung in the gates, then appointments consistent with this separation were made (v. 1). Gatekeepers are first mentioned, a seriously responsible occupation, for they must receive in all who should be in and keep out all who should be out. They should therefore be able to discern between those who made deceitful claims and those who were true. In the Church of God today we surely need such gatekeepers, but the Church has no authority to appoint them. Rather, since the Spirit of God dwells in the Church, He will exercise godly men to willingly do their necessary work without the need of appointment. They have the Word of God to guide them in this, for the Spirit of God always works by means of that Word.

Singers were also appointed in Jerusalem, those who by singing expressed praise to the God of Israel. Surely in the Church of God praise should be prominent, and even more overflowing than in Judaism, for we praise the Lord as the One who has accomplished a full redemption for us by means of the sufferings of the cross, and has been raised in glory to the right hand of God. Do we need appointments in order to offer such praise? Certainly not. The Spirit of God draws forth the praise and thanksgiving of our hearts in voluntary worship.

As well as gatekeepers and singers being appointed, Levites were appointed to their particular work. They were of the tribe of Levi, servants to occupy themselves with the service of the temple. They are typical of those today who are given service to do by the Lord. Thus special gifts are given by the Spirit of God. These too are not put in their place by appointment in the Church of God, but rather are given gifts which will be recognized without any appointment where the work of the Spirit of God is submitted to. Though not appointed, some labour much, others not so much. But though Nehemiah was governor of Judah, he appointed Hanani, his brother, and with him Hananiah to have charge of the city of Jerusalem (v. 2). The wording here seems rather unclear as to which is referred to as "a faithful man" who "feared God more than many." Perhaps Hananiah is meant, since we read of him also in chapter 1:2, but Nehemiah addressed both of them in verse 3. He gives the instructions that the gates were not to be opened until the sun was well up, and then even while

guards were present the doors were to remain shut and barred, except, no doubt, when they must be opened for those who were allowed to go in and out. Thus, instructions came from the governor (a type of Christ) and were to be carried out by Hanani and Hananiah, typical of a two-fold work of the Spirit of God in regard to admission or refusal, for the grace of God is shown in admission, but firm government of God in refusal. The Spirit of God ministers both of these.

### **THE RECORD OF THE FIRST RETURNED CAPTIVES (vv. 4-73)**

Verse 4 tells us that "the city was large and spacious, but the people in it were few, and the houses were not rebuilt." Before this the Lord had reproved the people for saying, "The time has not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built" (Hag. 1:2), and he asked them, "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your panelled houses, and this temple to lie in ruins? (v. 4). At that time the people neglected the house of God and concentrated on their own houses, Now the reverse was true. How sadly unbalanced we so easily become! Surely we should have true concern for the truth of the house of God, but in doing so, should we neglect our own house? Well does Paul remind Timothy that "if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Tim. 5:8). How tragic was the condition of things in Judah at the time Isaiah wrote, "You number the houses of Jerusalem, and the houses you broke down to fortify the wall" (Isa. 22:10). Do we do anything similar? Because we want to fortify the wall of separation from the world, do we sacrifice the proper welfare of our own families for this cause? Can we be surprised that the enemy reproaches us for such inconsistency?

At this time God put into Nehemiah's heart the desire to gather the nobles, rulers and the people with the object of registering the people by genealogy (v. 5). This was consistent with the desire that the houses should be built, for it emphasizes the fact that every individual believer is precious to God, therefore all should have houses, a sphere of family responsibility that emphasizes unity in diversity.

Nehemiah then found a register of those who had come to Judah in the first group, before either Ezra or he had returned. This list is given in verses 6 to 63. There were some, however, who claimed to be priests whose names were not found in the register (v. 64). Since these claims were questionable, they were excluded from the priesthood as being defiled. Could this possibly be reversed? There was only one possibility that the governor suggested, that is, if a priest who had the urim and thummim were to be present (v. 65). This was unlikely, because the urim and thummim are never recorded as having been used after



Abiathar the priest used the ephod to enquire of God for David (1 Sam. 23:9-12). The urim and thummim (meaning "lights and perfections") were the 12 precious stones placed in the ephod. They indicate the unity of the 12 tribes of Israel and were used to inquire of God, for God answers all questions concerning Israel from the viewpoint of recognizing **all** Israel.

But there have been tragic divisions and separations in Israel, and the urim and thummim will never be regained until Christ, God's anointed priest stands up to reunite all the tribes of Israel at the end of the Great Tribulation. Similarly, in the Church today, priestly discernment in many cases is lacking, and we are shut up to waiting upon God to show His own will in His own time. If a person's title is clear there is no question. In questionable cases, we can only bow to the Word of God which says, "The Lord knows those who are His" (2 Tim 2:19). If we have no proof that one is a believer, we cannot accept him as such. If he claims to be a believer, yet associates with those who hold evil doctrine, then his case is certainly questionable, for the rest of the above verse says, "Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity."

The total number of those who had returned from the captivity was 42,360 (v. 66), besides their male and female servants who numbered 7,337. Their singers are mentioned too, and also animals, horses, mules, camels and donkeys (vv. 67-69). This number included all those in the various cities of Judah as well as Jerusalem (v. 73).

It is good to read that some of the heads of the fathers' houses contributed to the work of the Lord (v. 70). The governor (though Nehemiah does not say, "I") gave 1000 gold drachmas and 2,200 silver minas. This was no small amount! The rest of the people gave 20,000 gold drachmas, 2,200 silver minas and 67 priestly garments. Nehemiah, instead of "receiving" as he had a right to do, was a liberal giver. Of course, such is true of the Lord Jesus, whose giving is beyond our computation.

The work of rebuilding the temple and the wall being completed, then we are told that the people were settled in their respective cities. Since their special needs had been met, now it was time to live lives consistent with the blessing God had given. This settling was completed in the seventh month.



*Water Gate, Jerusalem*

## **CHAPTER 8**

### **8. Public reading of the law**

**Verses 1-8. The law read before the Water gate**

**Verses 9-12. Effect of the word.**

### **THE READING OF THE LAW (vv. 1-12)**

We have seen at the end of chapter 6 the wall was completed, and in chapter 7 appointments were made for the proper order to be maintained in the city. Now another matter of greatest importance is set before the people of Judah. Just as in any revival, the Word of God must be given the foremost place, so it is in chapter 8. For the first time in this book Ezra the scribe is mentioned. This man

shows a lovely spirit. Though his ministry was absolutely essential for the returned remnant, he did not put himself forward until the work of rebuilding was finished, and even then it was not he who asked for such a place of prominence. Rather, when the people gathered "as one man" in the open square in front of the water gate, Ezra was "told to bring the book of the Law of Moses" (v. 1).

God was working most manifestly in the people being unitedly gathered as they were, and the time had come when they would spontaneously recognize the value of the Word of God. This took place on the first day of the seventh month (v. 2), which Leviticus 23:23-25 indicates as "a memorial of blowing of trumpets," a time of great rejoicing. Yet here in Nehemiah there is no mention of trumpets. Why is this the case? Is it not because true joy could not be restored to Israel apart from their hearing the Word of God? Thus, at this time God would occupy them with hearing His Word apart from the trumpets.

This was no 20 minute sermon, but the reading of God's Word from morning until midday, with all the people being attentive to hear what the Book of the Law said (v. 3). This took place in front of the water gate, for water is a symbol of the Word of God (Eph. 5:26), a necessity every day of our lives, both for drinking and for cleansing.

Ezra stood on a wooden platform, made for this purpose, to be visible to all the people and his voice more easily heard. Six men stood at his right hand (making 7 with Ezra himself), and seven at his left, thus symbolizing completeness of fellowship, for 14 is  $7 \times 2$ , 7 being the complete number and two speaking of testimony or fellowship.

When Ezra opened the book of the Law, all the people stood up spontaneously. This was God's doing, and thus there was seen a willing response for God's Word. Then "Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God" (v. 6). What is implied in this blessing? Mark 14:22 and Luke 22:19, compared together, make this clear, for Mark says, "Jesus took bread and blessed and broke it," while Luke, referring to the same occasion, says, "He took bread and gave thanks and broke it." Thus it is clear that Ezra's blessing was a prayer of thanksgiving. How right it was then for all the people to respond, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands and bowing their heads in worship.

A number of men are mentioned then who were able to help the people to understand what Ezra was reading (v. 7). Having been captives in Babylon for years, the people no doubt learned the language of their captors and the Jewish language would not be well known by many, therefore they would require help

in understanding it. In the Church of God today there are many who have difficulty understanding the Word of God because accustomed to think in different terms than those expressed in scripture, and they need the help of teachers who are well acquainted with the truth of God.

At the end of verse 9 we are told that "all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law." Why so? No doubt because the law exposed the failure of the people. Yet Nehemiah and Ezra and the Levites told the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn nor weep." Why not weep on account of their failure? Because the Word of God has a higher object than to expose sin: it declares His grace to sinners.

Rather than weeping, the people were told to "Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the Lord is your strength" (v. 10). This is not mere natural joy, but the joy of the Lord, which is strength for doing good, such as providing for others who do not have the same advantages as we.

The Word of God having been given to them, with the faithful advice of their leaders, the people responded with great joy, feasting and sending portions to the poor, "because they understood the words that were declared to them" (v. 12). When God is given His place, the result will always be great joy and blessing.

### **THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES (vv. 13-18)**

The heads of the fathers' houses, with the priests and Levites, were evidently so impressed by the Word of God as to realize how little they knew about it, so that on the second day they gathered to learn more from Ezra (v. 13). The feasts of Israel should have been well known to the Jews, but though three of these particular occasions were prescribed for the seventh month, they were evidently totally ignorant of this. Now they learn from Ezra's reading of scripture that there was a "Feast of Tabernacles" ordained for seven days, beginning with the 15th day of the month (Lev. 23:33-39). They had missed the feast of trumpets, which was the first day of the seventh month, for Ezra had only begun reading scripture to them on that day. But why they missed the Day of Atonement on the tenth day (Lev. 23:27) seems questionable.

They found that during the week of the Feast of Tabernacles Israel was to dwell in booths, which were to be made with branches of olive trees, other oil trees, myrtle trees, palm branches and branches of leafy trees. Therefore the people went out and gathered the necessary branches and made booths, some on top of

their houses, some in their courtyards or the courts of the temple, or in open squares in the city (v. 16). No doubt they did not realize the significance of what they did, but being obedient to the Word of God they had "very great gladness." However, this occasion signifies the blessing God will give Israel in the millennium, when they are brought back from their centuries of sinful departure from God. Actually, the Great Day of Atonement will prepare them for this, for on that day Israel was commanded to afflict their souls in repentance and self-judgment, as will be true when they "look upon Me whom they pierced (Zech. 12:10-14), as the Lord says, and in brokenness of heart receive Him as their Messiah.

All will be changed for them. Their living in booths signifies the blessing coming to them then, even the weather always being favorable, so that no storms, rain or snow or wind will disturb their comfort even in such dwellings. There will be no fear of thieves or robbers either, no fear of violence or of unwelcome harassment, but all the people living in peace and harmony.

Though the Lord had commanded that this feast should be kept every year, verse 17 tells us that Israel had not kept this feast by dwelling in booths since the days of Joshua. Does it not seem strange to us that all through the history of the book of Judges, through Samuel's time and through the history of all the kings, this feast had been ignored? We do read of Passovers being kept, specially in Hezekiah's day (2 Chron. 30) and during Josiah's reign (2 Chron. 35:1-19), but why not the Feast of Tabernacles? Surely this compares with the history of the Church, for the Feast of Tabernacles symbolizes the great blessing in store for Israel, while the truth of the coming of the Lord tells us of the great blessing in store for the Church. This truth of the Lord's coming was virtually forgotten until the 19th century, though it should have been kept fresh in the minds of believers at all times. The Rapture of the Church of God will introduce us into the unspeakable blessing of peace perfectly accomplished, never to be disturbed for eternity; indeed high above the blessing in Israel of which the dwelling booths symbolizes. When the Church began to be awakened as to the value of prophecy, it was not long till the Lord made clear that the Rapture of the Church should take place at least seven years before the Lord will return in power and glory to set up His earthly kingdom.

Every day of the seven days of the feast Ezra read from the Word of God to the assembled people of Judah. Today also, as the truth of the Lord's coming is impressed on us, there has been a revived interest in searching the Word of God on the part of many. Sadly, some have searched it merely from an intellectual point of view, with no real heart to obey the Lord, but to further their own

selfish interests. Yet others have a true desire to honor Christ and to serve Him acceptably with reverence and godly fear.

On the eighth day there was a sacred assembly, an assembly of special character, for number 8 speaks of a new beginning. Number 7 indicates completeness, so that both numbers have an application to the same thing, that is, our future destiny will be the completion of God's counsels for us, but in another way it speaks of a new beginning.

## **CHAPTER 9**

### **9. Spiritual Revival**

**Verses 1-5. The public confession**

**Verses 6-38. The great confession and prayer**

#### **ISRAEL'S GUILT CONFESSED TO THEIR CREATOR (vv. 1-6)**

The Great Day of Atonement was on the *first* day of the seventh month, followed by the Feast of Tabernacles beginning the 15th day; but what should have been done on the first day was not done until the 24th day of the month (v. 1). This surely indicates that the people were not as sensitive to the seriousness of their sin as they ought to have been. However, when this was impressed on them, there was some real exercise of soul awakened, to face the guilt of their condition before God. In Ezra 10:9 we read of the Jews being gathered on the 20th day of the ninth month for the purpose of united self-judgment. It may be that this occasion required two months to complete, for likely Ezra and Nehemiah refer to the same occasion.

The gathering was with fasting and sackcloth, and even dust on their heads. At this time those who were Israelites separated from foreigners, confessing their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. Ezra emphasized the guilt of the Jews having mixed themselves by marriage with foreign people and having shared in their idolatrous worship (Ez. 9:1-2).

The standard by which they were to judge was the Book of the Law of the Lord God, therefore for one fourth part of the day they confessed their sins and worshiped the Lord (v. 3). Then eight Levites stood on the stairs and cried out with a loud voice to the Lord, evidently in intercession for the people (v. 4). After thus addressing the Lord, they then addressed the people, encouraging them to "Stand up and bless the Lord your God forever and ever! Blessed be your glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise!" How

appropriate it is to first of all give the Lord the place of Highest preeminence, for He *alone* is Lord, and has made heaven and the heaven of heavens with all their hosts of heavenly bodies, as well as the earth and everything in it, the sea with all its inhabitants. Having made all these things, God also preserves them. Also all the hosts of heaven worship Him.

### **GOD'S CHOICE OF ABRAHAM (vv. 7-8)**

Verse 6 has insisted that God is Creator, which is a very real reason for Israel judging their sins before Him; but verses 7 and 8 give an additional serious reason. God had chosen their father Abram, and called him from Ur of the Chaldees, changing his name to Abraham, to be the father of a special nation, this favored nation Israel. When God had called him *out* from a land of idol worshipers, then certainly any measure of return to idols on Israel's part was an insult to God.

In fact, God had found Abraham's heart faithful and made a covenant with him (v. 8). Notice, this covenant was not conditional on Abraham's future faithfulness, but on the basis that Abraham had *already* proven faithful, so that the promise was unconditional. This should have spoken deeply to the hearts and consciences of Israel to produce within them true concern for the honor of the Lord, a willing faithfulness rather than obedience forced by the regulations of law.

This covenant involved God's giving to Israel the land that was held by the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Jubusites and Girgashites. God had proven true to His Word, "for," as the Jews now say, "You are righteous." Such blessing being given to Israel, this was certainly a good reason for their being obedient, and now a reason for their humble confession of having been disobedient.

### **ISRAEL DELIVERED FROM EGYPT (vv. 9-12)**

Another reason for Israel's proper self-judgment is given now in these verses. God in great mercy had observed the affliction of their fathers in Egypt. After leading them out, when they came to the Red Sea He heard their cry of distress (v. 4). In fact, He had shown signs before this against Pharaoh and his servants, by inflicting them with ten plagues (v. 10) to break down the stubborn resistance of Egypt, so that God's name was exalted and the pride of Egypt brought down.

When Israel cried to God, He divided the Red Sea to make a path of dry ground for them to pass through unharmed. Then He overthrew their enemies by the

return of the sea to its accustomed condition, drowning them as though they had been a stone thrown into the waters (v. 11).

Besides this, both before and after the Red Sea experience, God led Israel by day in a pillar of cloud and by night in a pillar of fire. Such miraculous intervention of God surely ought to have greatly impressed Israel. Believers today also are no less cared for by God's miraculous power, for they are indwelt by the Spirit of God who leads always in the best way possible whether by day or night.

### **A RIGHTEOUS LAW GIVEN THEM (vv. 13-15)**

Here is another reason Israel ought to have kept from evil, or when having disobeyed, to turn back to God in genuine repentance. After His marvelous grace in delivering Israel from bondage, God gave them a law that was perfectly righteous in contrast to the laws of other nations. In doing so, it was transparently clear that God Himself was speaking.

Israel's consciences could well bear witness to the fact that God's law for them was perfectly righteous, and not only this, for He provided the Sabbath day to be kept not only for God's honour, but for Israel's blessing, to at least relieve the people of hard lab or for one day per week, for it is always true that when God's name is honoured the people will be blessed (v. 14). These commandments were given by the mediatorship of Moses, whom Israel has always revered, at least since his death! Thus, in the law itself God had shown wonderful kindness to Israel.

Added to this were God's miracles of giving Israel bread from heaven (the manna) and water from the rock (v. 15), just before the law was given, so that Israel was provided for all through their wilderness journey. Thus, Israel was given every reason for thankfulness and devoted obedience to God.

### **GOD STILL GRACIOUS WHEN ISRAEL SINNED (vv. 16-21)**

After being blessed so greatly, we are told, "they and our fathers acted proudly, hardened their necks, and did not heed Your commandments. They refused to obey" (vv. 16-17). This was simply cold-hearted rebellion, ignoring the great wonders God had done among them for their welfare, going so far as to appoint a leader in opposition to Moses with the object of returning to the bondage of Egypt. Of course, God would not allow any such thing. Yet, He is a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abundant in kindness, and did not forsake them." The patience of God with them is practically amazing. Even when they made a golden calf, worshiping it as the god who brought them out of Egypt, God still bore with their evil in His manifold mercy (vv. 18-19). He



continued to lead them by the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. There was no lack of testimony that God was sustaining them and leading them through a wilderness that would have swallowed them up if they had not been kept by divine power.

More than this, God gave them His Spirit to instruct them by the instrumentality of Moses and Aaron, a wonderful provision of grace, though Israel showed little appreciation of it at the time. Looking back, these Levites in Nehemiah's time could clearly discern this. At this time too the Lord did not at all withhold the manna from them, and supplied water as they needed it. This continued for the entire wilderness journey (forty years), so that they lacked nothing. Think of the many occasions very recently of thousands of people fleeing as refugees and dying for lack of food and water! Yet between two and three million Israelites were sustained by God for 40 years of wilderness wandering! In that time too their clothes did not wear out, and their feet did not swell. Were they so insensible as to not appreciate this?

### **GOD'S GREAT BLESSING IN THE LAND (vv. 22-25)**

The Levites then recounted the grace of God in having given Israel the victory over various enemies, whose land God had before decided was to belong to Israel. Before entering the land of Canaan, they took possession of the land of Sihon king of the Amorites and that of Og king of Bashan (v. 22). God multiplied the nation greatly and brought them into the land He had promised (v. 23), subduing the inhabitants of the land before Israel, so that Israel could take possession of this. When the power and grace of God in this was so manifest, Israel certainly had further cause for fully obeying God, and no excuse for disobeying.

"And they took strong cities and a rich land, and possessed houses full of all goods, cisterns already dug, vineyards, olive groves, and fruit trees in abundance. So they ate and were filled and grew fat, and delighted themselves in Your great goodness" (v. 25).

### **FURTHER GUILT; GOD'S CHASTENING AND GRACE (vv. 26-31)**

Again, after Israel had been so marvellously blessed by God, they became thoroughly disobedient, rebelling and despising the law He had so graciously given them. God sent prophets to testify against their evil with the object of turning them back to Him, but they not only refused to listen: they went as far as to kill such faithful messengers (v. 26). Provocations like this moved God to

deliver them into the hand of their enemies who oppressed them. This is seen in the Book of Judges and during the history of the kings.

Yet when they found themselves in such deep trouble as to cry out to God for His mercy, God did respond in compassionate goodness, as the Levites here declare, "You heard from heaven; and according to Your abundant mercies You gave them deliverers who saved them from the hand of their enemies (v. 27).

Yet, after being given relief, they again turned to evil, so that they were left some time under the domination of their enemies until they returned to God, crying to Him for deliverance. This was not only two or three times, but "many times You delivered them according to Your mercies" (v. 28). The very reading of such a history of failure, then restoration, then further failure and further grace from God, followed again by failure, becomes wearying to a reader. How much more wearying to God!

Though it is wearying to read of Israel's continually repeated disobedience, this history surely impresses us with the marvel of the patience of God! "They shrugged their shoulders, stiffened their necks, and would not hear" (v. 29). This went on for many years, with the Spirit of God moving prophets to stir their consciences, then using enemy nations to chastise them (v. 30).

"Nevertheless," the Levites added, "in Your great mercy You did not utterly consume them nor forsake them" (v. 31). Why not? "For You are God, gracious and merciful." This remains true for us today, when Israel, because of the enormous guilt of having rejected and crucified God's Son, has been for centuries in a rebellious state and suffering for it. But God is still God, and He knows how to deliver and restore His people, as He will after they suffer the horrors of the Great Tribulation, and cry out to Him in humble repentance and faith (Hosea 14:4-9).

### **PRAYER FOR GOD'S MERCY (vv. 32-38)**

After having acknowledged Israel's many failures of the past, the Levites seek the face of God in earnest prayer, calling Him "the great and mighty and awesome God," who was not like Israel in their breaking the covenant of law, but who may be depended on to perfectly keep His covenant (v. 32). They ask that God will not consider the trouble small that had come on their kings, princes, priests, prophets, their fathers and all the people, from the time of Assyria's oppression "until this day."

But the trouble was not small because Israel's disobedience was not small. They confess this in verse 33, saying that God was just in what He had allowed:

their suffering was no more than they deserved. God had dealt faithfully in contrast to Israel's unfaithfulness, which they confess as wickedness on the part of all the people from the greatest to the least (v. 34). Thus they laid their hearts bare in the sight of God, making no excuses, but judging themselves unsparingly for their guilt (v. 35).

In verses 36-37 they speak of the results that they were then suffering because of their disobedience: they were servants to a foreign king, so that the fruit of their land was enjoyed by the kings who had taken them captive. These kings had dominion even over their bodies and their possessions, and could do as they pleased with the Jews. Thus they were in great distress. We must remember though, that God had shown great mercy to Nehemiah by disposing King Artaxerxes to act in unusual kindness to him and to Israel. Yet they were still in bondage, and they had to learn to bow to God's sovereign government in allowing this unpleasant situation.

Their prayer was accompanied by their decision to "make a sure covenant." This was of course a renewal of the covenant of law given by Moses (ch. 10:29), for Israel was then still under law. Would they succeed any better than they had before? Certainly not! But God used this occasion with the intention of making Israel more fully realize that, not only did they fail in practice, but that they had a sinful nature that could not cease from sin, and therefore that they must be born again. But we are all slow learners. Why? Because of our own selfish pride.

## **CHAPTER 10**

### **10. The covenant renewed**

#### **9:38-10:28. The commitment to support God's house**

#### **Verses 29-39. The obligations of the covenant**

#### **THE NAMES OF THOSE WHO SEALED (vv. 1-27)**

Nehemiah is first mentioned as having endorsed the covenant, then 22 priests listed along with him (vv. 1-8). Then 17 Levites are listed (vv. 9-13), followed by 44 leaders of the people (vv. 14-27). We may wonder if some of them did not have doubts about their ability to keep the covenant, or of the likelihood that they would. No doubt they wanted to express their desire to obey the Lord at least. The Lord did not say at this time what He thought of it, but the New Testament makes His thoughts very clear, as for instance Romans 3:19, "Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the

law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God."

### **THE TERMS OF THE COVENANT (vv. 28-39)**

All the people who had separated themselves from the nations in the land, with a desire of obeying the law of God, joined with their leaders in making an oath, with a curse attached for any infraction, to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord, His ordinances and statutes. Of course this was a repetition of their promise to keep the law at the time it was given. The special sin at the time was emphasized in verse 30. Though they had done so, now they promise not to give their daughters as wives to the people of the land, nor take their daughters for Israelitish sons (v. 30).

Secondly, they agree not to buy anything from the inhabitants of the land on the Sabbath day or on any other holy day. Thirdly, they promise to release every debt in the seventh year (v. 31). Fourthly, they made an ordinance to exact from themselves one-third of a shekel for the service of the house of God and the regular rituals connected with this (v. 32). A fifth action taken was to cast lots among priests, Levites and the people to decide who would bring the wood offering at the proper time year by year (v. 34).

A sixth decision was made at this time to bring the firstfruits of the ground and the firstfruits of all the fruit of the trees, each year, to the house of the Lord (v. 35). It is too great a temptation to people to first make sure that their own needs are met before considering giving to the Lord. But faith will consider Him first. In fact, this is only true wisdom, for if He is honored, He will make sure that the needs of His people will be properly met. If we agree to this fact, do we act on it?

The same was decided as regards bringing to the Lord the firstborn of their sons and of their cattle, to the priests as offerings (v. 36). Other offerings also were included in this, even dough, fruit, wine and oil. The tithes of the land also were included in this covenant, tithes to be given to the Levites (v. 37). It was agreed too that the priests would see to it that the Levites would give one tenth of the tithes to the storehouse of the temple (v. 38). Thus they promised to observe all these laws, saying, "We will not neglect the house of our God" (v. 39).

These were good intentions. But it was not long before the Book of Malachi was written, in which God asks Israel, "Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me! But you say, In what way have we robbed You? In tithes and offerings" (Mal. 3:8). Thus Malachi shows the great departure of Israel from

this covenant made in Nehemiah's time, not only in withholding tithes and offerings, but in many other ways, so that there were only few remaining who really feared the Lord (Mal. 3:16).

## **CHAPTER 11**

### **11-12. The dedication of the walls**

#### **11:1-36. Faithful workers**

#### **12:1-26. Other faithful people**

#### **12: 27-43. Dedication of the walls**

#### **12: 44-47. Provisions for temple personnel**

### **THE INHABITANTS OF JERUSALEM AND OTHER CITIES (vv. 1-25)**

Jerusalem being God's centre, the leaders of the people lived there, but the people evidently preferred other places, so that the proposal was made to cast lots as to who should live in Jerusalem. One out of ten were required to live there (v. 1). However, there were some who willingly offered to live there, and the people blessed these for their faith in doing so. There is a spiritual lesson in this. Do we want to live as near as we can to the Lord? -- for Jerusalem was His place of residence among the people. In the Church today the Lord Jesus Himself is the Centre of gathering, and how good it is if we delight in keeping close to Him.

Verse 3 indicates a list of the heads of the provinces who lived in Jerusalem, but not including those who lived in their own possessions in their cities. There were evidently some priests, Levites and Nethinim who did not live in Jerusalem, though others did (v. 3). Not only those of the tribe of Levi lived in Jerusalem, but some people from Judah and from Benjamin. Those from Judah are listed in verse 4-6, then those from Benjamin in verses 7-9. The list of the priests follows in verses 10-14, and the Levites in verses 15-18, their total being 184, which was much lower than the number of the priests. The number of the gatekeepers was 172 (v. 19). The Nethinim (temple servants) lived in Ophel, which was in close proximity to Jerusalem (v. 21).

In the city the overseer of the Levites was Uzzi, he being evidently connected with the sons of Asaph, the singers in the house of the Lord (v. 22). All was well organized. We do not find such appointments in the New Testament. But

we do find the Spirit of God present, who can order everything in a better and more orderly way than by having people appointed for each kind of service. The singers picture the kind of ministry that encourages the joy of the saints of God, to cause the worship of the Lord to overflow from hearts wrought upon by the Spirit of God. Thus, even at the hour of the Lord's anticipating the unspeakable sorrow of the cross, it is said concerning Him and His apostles, "And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives" (Mk. 14:26).

As regards the details of the people's needs, Pethahiah was appointed to care for this; but in the Church of God such work should be done by shepherds (or pastors) who need no appointment whatever, but gladly serve because of genuine affection for the Lord and concern for the souls of saints. 1 Peter 5:2 encourages elders among the saints to "Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion, but willingly, not for dishonest gain, but eagerly ; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock."

Verses 25-36 list the cities outside of Jerusalem with their nearby villages, some being in the area of Judah and some in Benjamin (vv. 25,36), for Jerusalem was virtually on the border of these two tribes. But we are shown here that God is vitally concerned as to where people live, and takes full account of this. Too frequently saints of God consider only the advantages to themselves in deciding where they should live, whether their employment in a certain place promises a high salary, whether a location is near to friends or relatives, or whether it is in an apparently pleasant neighbourhood. If such things have too strong an attraction for us, ought we not to stop and consider that the Lord has a vital interest in this matter? Do we consider His interests first? What about being near to an assembly where we can be a blessing to others?

## **CHAPTER 12**

### **PRIESTS AND LEVITES (vv. 1-26)**

In these verses God sees fit to list the names of the priests and Levites who came to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel in the first return for the rebuilding of the city. Ezra refers to these in chapter 2 of his book, but God is concerned to express His own approval of every individual who is exercised to help in recovery of the testimony of His truth in times when failure has resulted in general apathy. The priests are listed first (vv. 10-7) and the Levites in verses 8-26. At least we can learn from this that God values the worship of devoted hearts, as is illustrated by the priests; and asks the service of those devoted to Him as is pictured in the

Levites. There is no reason why both of these characteristics should not be seen in every believer today.

### **THE DEDICATION OF THE WALL (vv. 27-43)**

We might naturally think that the dedication of the wall would immediately follow the report of its being completed (ch. 6:5), but we have seen many things intervene, things that had to be taken care of that were inconsistent with the truth the wall emphasizes, that is, godly separation from all that would bring dishonor to the name of the Lord. Therefore only when these things had been faced and judged as before God was it time to dedicate the wall. How could the people really rejoice before God (as the dedication required) when they were acting badly?

The dedication then was an occasion "to celebrate with gladness, both with thanksgiving and singing, with cymbals and stringed instruments and harps" (v. 27). The Levites were gathered from the surrounding area and the sons of the singers also, who had built villages for themselves all around Jerusalem (v. 29). At least, though these did not live in Jerusalem itself, yet they are found "all around Jerusalem," recognizing Jerusalem as God's center. Thus, though they are not seen in closest proximity to the Lord, they typically regard Him as their Centre. No doubt there are many like them in the Church of God today.

The priests and Levites purified themselves, the people, the gates and the wall (v. 30). Of course this was by a formal ritual, which is only symbolic of the moral self-judgment that believers today should practice continually, not only at special times. Thus Nehemiah brought the leaders of Judah up on the wall, where he appointed two large "thanksgiving choirs." One of these groups marched to the right hand on the wall, half of the leaders being with them (vv. 31-32), and some of the priests' sons with trumpets, others with different musical instruments. Ezra took the lead before this group (v. 36).

"The other thanksgiving choir went the opposite way, and I (Nehemiah) was behind them" (v. 38). Evidently the two groups met by the gate of the prison (v. 39). The various gates of the city are mentioned, for they illustrate truths of serious importance for us today, for instance, "the Refuse Gate" (v. 1), which speaks of the putting away of the filth of the flesh; the Fountain Gate (v. 37), symbolizing the refreshment of the Word of God by the living power of the Spirit; the Water Gate, also insisting on the value of the Word of God; the gate of Ephraim (v. 39), speaking of fruitfulness in the believer's life; the Old Gate (v. 39), indicating the importance of maintaining "the old paths," not being enticed away by new suggestions; the Sheep Gate" (v. 39), reminding us of care

for the sheep as well as of the sacrifice of Christ; then the Gate of the Prison (v. 39), with its solemn message that God does not allow evil to go unchecked. This was where the two groups stopped, for the lesson of God's judgment of evil was specially needed after Israel had recognized how evil their history had been.

Still, the trumpets and other musical instruments were employed in praise and thanksgiving to God, and the day was one of great rejoicing. The two thanksgiving choirs eventually "stood in the house of God" (v. 40), the priests with trumpets and the singers singing loudly. Also, evidently afterwards, they offered great sacrifices, and their joy was so great the noise of it was heard far from Jerusalem (v. 43).

### **FURTHER APPOINTMENTS FOR SERVICE (vv. 44-47)**

At this same time appointments were made for keeping the rooms of the storehouse, which would call for faithful men to take care of offerings and tithes and to see that there was proper disbursement to the priests and Levites, for Judah had reason to be thankful to have the priests and Levites ministering in their places (v. 44). Singers and gatekeepers were put in their places too, with David's example to encourage them. Now in the days of Zerubbabel and Nehemiah all Israel contributed to the support of these singers and gatekeepers. Similarly today, we should be thankful to have those among the saints who will devote themselves to encouraging the joy of the people, and those who are concerned as gatekeepers to see that those who ought to be allowed in are welcomed, and that those who should not be in are kept out. This is not the easiest job, but it is important, and we should always back up what is truly done for the Lord.

## **CHAPTER 13**

### **13. Evils corrected**

#### **Verses 1-9. Separation enforced**

#### **SEPARATION FROM MIXTURE (vv. 1-3)**

At this same time, of which chapter 12:27-47 speaks, they read in the Book of Moses that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever come into the assembly of God, because of their hostility against Israel at the first (Deut. 23:3-4). They had even hired Balaam to curse Israel, which curse God changed into a blessing. However, the Jews now acted on this instruction and separated themselves from the mixed multitude. Mixtures of believers and unbelievers are also forbidden in the New Testament (2 Cor. 6:14-18). Though much had been



done before in seeking to correct the wrongs that had filtered in amongst the people, and though the building of the wall had indicated God's clear principle of separation from evil, yet evil has a way of intruding itself persistently among the people of God, and must be faced, as it was at this time, when "the mixed multitude was separated from Israel. When there is freshness of faith there will be faithfulness in action, though when faith becomes weak or lax, then evil will re-assert itself.

### **MORE FAILURE NEEDING CORRECTION (vv. 4-30)**

It appears most difficult to discern the chronological order of the events in chapters 12 and 13, for verse 4 speaks of what had taken place "before this," and verse 6 tells us that Nehemiah was not in Jerusalem during this time, since he had returned to the king. It may be that the dedication of the wall did not take place until Nehemiah's return. But we do not need to know the exact order in which events took place, but to seek rather to discern the moral lessons in the order that is given us.

At least it was before the time spoken of in verses 1 to 4 that Eliashib the high priest had prepared housing for Tobiah in a large room that had been used for storing the offerings etc. (v. 5). But Tobiah was an Ammonite (ch. 2:19) who should have been totally excluded from the congregation of Israel (v. 1). How easily it seems people make friends with the enemies of God because they show a nice, friendly attitude! Satan himself knows how to deceive believers by such means.

Nehemiah had at first spent 12 years in Jerusalem before returning to the king. During that time Eliashib should have learned by experience the deceitful character of Tobiah, but like many believers today, he likely thought he was being large-hearted and kind in showing favoritism to Tobiah, possibly thinking that Tobiah would be drawn by this to fully favor Israel. However, when Nehemiah, in returning to Jerusalem, found that Eliashib had so befriended Tobiah, he acted immediately, throwing out all the household goods of Tobiah and giving command to the priests to clean the rooms (vv. 8-9). This was godly, decisive action, reminding us of the prompt action of the Lord Jesus when he found in the temple those who sold oxen, sheep and doves, as well as money-changers. He drove them all out of the temple (Jn. 2:14-15).

Then Nehemiah brought back into the rooms the articles that rightly belonged there, with the grain offerings and frankincense. He found also that this indifference as regards the storing of the offerings had led to the neglect of distributing to the Levites the portions that ought to have been given them.

Perhaps Tobiah had been appropriating some of this! The Levites had gone back to their own fields for support (v. 10).

Nehemiah strongly censured the rulers for allowing such a state of things. "Why is the house of God forsaken?" he asked them. He did not confine this to one or two leaders, but gathered them together to face this serious matter (v. 11). He spoke with such authority that no one could oppose him, but all Judah was required to bring the tithe of the grain, the new wine and the oil to the storehouse (v. 12). This may well remind us of Paul's words to the Corinthians after they had promised a year earlier to send monetary help to the poor saints in Jerusalem, but had not done it. He told them, "now you also must complete the doing of it" (2 Cor. 8:11). Judah had been negligent and the rulers had not enforced the law. Nehemiah then appointed as treasurers of the storehouse one priest, one scribe and two Levites, for they were considered to be faithful men (v. 13). All of this surely indicates that God is concerned to have His servants properly cared for, though in the Church of God it is not scriptural to make human appointments for the distribution of support for God's servants. God Himself, by the power of the Spirit of God, will exercise the individuals He chooses to be concerned about doing such work. He will not fail in caring for His servants, though Israel failed in this responsibility. In verse 14 Nehemiah prayed that God would remember him concerning the good he had done for the house of God. We do not read of New Testament leaders praying in this way, though Paul tells Timothy, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only, but also to all who have loved His appearing" (2 Tim. 4:6-7). He does not ask God to remember him, but declares that God will reward him.

Though Nehemiah asks God to remember him because of the good deeds he had done for the house of God, Paul did not ask for such a remembrance, but rather declares that God will reward him. He had fought the good fight, had finished **the** race and had kept the faith. (2 Tim. 4:6-7). Paul writes as one who had learned deeply the true grace of God, while Nehemiah writes from the viewpoint of being under law.

"In those days" (not denoting the exact time), Nehemiah saw people in Judah treading winepresses on the Sabbath, bringing in sheaves, loading donkeys with wine, grapes, figs and many kinds of burdens, bringing them into Jerusalem. Of course this was contrary to God's law, and Nehemiah warned them against such abuses (v. 15). Also men of Tyre who lived in the area were bringing in fish and other goods to sell to the people of Judah on the Sabbath (v. 16).

Nehemiah rightly blamed the nobles for allowing these things (v. 17). He told them they were bringing added wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath (v. 18). They were under law: why were they not keeping the law? Under grace today we have no such obligation, for the Sabbath is not given to us. Rather, the Lord's Day, the first day of the week, is a special day in some sense. It was the day on which the Lord Jesus was raised from the dead, and the day on which the disciples gathered to break bread (Acts 20:7). Our governments give the Lord's Day some recognition, so that we are generally freed from usual employment, to use the day specially for the Lord. No law demands it, but surely we should be thankful for this opportunity and seek to give the Lord every honor we can apart from any law to require it.

Nehemiah did not stop with merely protesting, however. He commanded that the gates of the city be shut at dusk and not opened till the Sabbath was past. Some servants were also posted at the gates to guard against anyone entering with a burden (v. 19). The merchants were determined to sell their goods as soon as possible and they came and lodged outside the walls overnight. When this happened once or twice, Nehemiah threatened them with arrest if they came again. Thus, they did not attempt this on the Sabbath again (v. 21). Then Nehemiah commanded the Levites to cleanse themselves and to guard the gates on the Sabbath day (v. 22). He was not only dealing with that question on the one occasion, but realized there would have to be constant vigilance to suppress the greed of people. For a second time Nehemiah entreated that God would remember him and spare him according to the greatness of His mercy (v. 22).

Another great distress to Nehemiah was that he saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon and Moab, resulting in a mixture in the language of the children. Such marriages were forbidden by law, but just as people are today, the people of Judah were more influenced by their feelings than by principles of truth (v. 24).

Nehemiah reacted by cursing them, striking some of them and pulling out their hair. If one did that today he would likely be faced with a two million dollar lawsuit! He also made them swear by God that they would not give their daughters as wives to the sons of foreigners nor take their daughters as wives for the sons of Israelites (v. 25). It is questionable that making such an oath would make any difference in their subsequent actions, but Nehemiah was concerned that Israel should keep the law. He reminded them that Solomon king of Israel had done just as they were doing, in fact marrying many wives of foreign nationality. They may have used this as an excuse, as though it was fully permissible for them to follow Solomon's example, but Nehemiah allowed no

such excuse, insisting that pagan women caused Solomon to sin. If they claimed to be believers, he says Solomon was a believer, beloved by God, and that fact made it the more shocking that he should sin as he did. He and they should be ashamed of such sin, which Nehemiah calls "this great evil" (v. 27).

Nehemiah then pleaded that God would remember **them**, but not for their blessing, rather that they would be repaid according to their works. In the case of the sons of Eliashib, they had corrupted the priesthood and God's covenant concerning it. This was abominable evil in God's sight.

Thus, Nehemiah cleansed Judah from everything pagan, that is, of foreign influence. This was negative work, but he replaced the evil with what was positive good. He assigned proper duties to the priests and Levites, including bringing the wood offerings and the firstfruits to the house of God at the appointed times (vv. 30-31).

Though Nehemiah had been used by God in a good measure of recovery for the remnant of Israel, yet we see in this last chapter there remained many things calling for correction, and these were signs that the condition of the people was in a state of deterioration. The same is true in the history of the Church publicly. Whatever measure of recovery God allows at any time, it only leads to eventual failure, telling us that the coming of the Lord Jesus is the only real remedy. May we look for this with earnest anticipation. At that time Nehemiah will have the full answer to his final prayer, "Remember me, O my God, for good."

### **Archaeological light**

#### **Page 138 (next): Glazed brick decor at Susa.**

"Darius I (522-486 BC) made Susa his administrative capital, building his palace in the Babylonian tradition, to which was added a throne room with columns in the Iranian tradition. The glazed brick decor of this palace centres on images of the Persian army. The archers are shown in ceremonial dress, rather than in fighting gear. Anxious to depict this pleated dress, in keeping with the tradition of Luristan, the Susian enamellers borrowed from the Greek model, but stylized it in their own inimitable way" – Louvre









### **Archaeological light: Ancient Susa**

*One of the oldest cities in Mesopotamia, Shushan (Susa) an ancient city of the Elamite, Persian and Parthian empires, located about 150 miles east of the current path of the Tigris River. Excavations have established that people were living at the acropolis in 5000 BCE and have shown the existence of urban structures about 4000 BCE, and it is reasonable that the town, situated on a strip of land between the rivers Karkheh (Choaspes) and Dez (Eulaeus), was already the political center of Elam in the fourth millennium.*

*A second part of the city is now called the royal hill. From written sources it is known that must have been ziggurat somewhere on that location. A third part is the artisan's quarter, which was to the east. The ruins of a donjon on a steep hilltop in the southeast date back to the earliest period.*

*Susa was initially the capital of the Elamite Empire (2700 BCE to 539 BCE). Ashurbanipal, the last great king of the Assyrians, conquered the city and the Elamites in 646 BCE.*

*A tablet was unearthed in 1854 by Henry Austin Layard in Nineveh, revealing that Ashurbanipal portrayed himself as an "avenger", seeking retribution for the humiliations the Elamites had inflicted on others:*

*Susa, the great holy city, abode of their Gods, seat of their mysteries, I*

*conquered. I entered its palaces, I opened their treasuries where silver and gold, goods and wealth were amassed...I destroyed the ziggurat of Susa. I smashed its shining copper horns. I reduced the temples of Elam to naught; their gods and goddesses I scattered to the winds. The tombs of their ancient and recent kings I devastated, I exposed to the sun, and I carried away their bones toward the land of Ashur. I devastated the provinces of Elam and on their lands I sowed salt.*

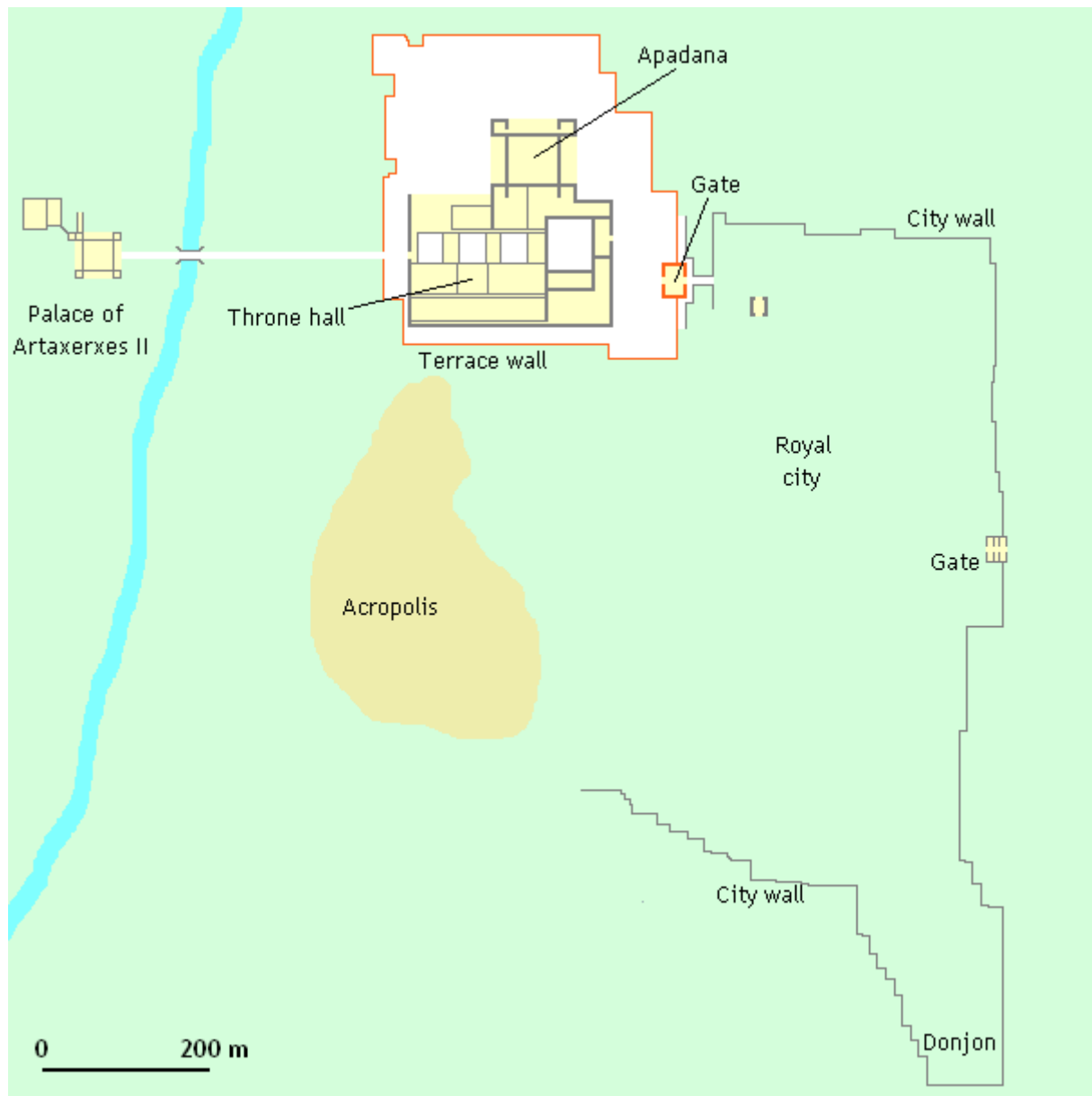
*The city was rebuilt by the Persian king Darius the Great (522-486). The Apadana palace was clearly his favorite residence, as the historian Herodotus did not know of another capital. The son of Cyrus the Great, Cambyses II, formally moved the capital from Pasargadae to Susa, making the city the center of the greatest empire of the time.*

*Alexander the Great conquered the city of Susa in 331 BCE, but his conquest did not outlast his death. During his occupation of the city, however, it was the scene of a mass marriage ceremony described by the Greek historian Arrian of Nicomedia during which many Macedonian officers were forced to marry Persian women.*

*Susa became one of the two capitals of the Parthian Empire (the other being Ctesiphon). Despite a brief period of Seleucid rule, Susa remained an important city first to the Parthians and later to the second Persian Empire under the Sassanid dynasty, particularly since the other capital was often a target of foreign invaders; Ctesiphon was sacked by Roman armies five different times between 116 and 297 CE. Susa was only captured once, by the Roman Emperor Trajan in 116 BCE, and the Romans were shortly forced to withdraw due to revolts.*

*Susa was devastated during the Islamic conquest of Persia in 638 CE, but the city survived until the Turkic Mongols destroyed the city in 1218 CE, after which it was gradually abandoned.*

*The scene of the Biblical book of Esther is laid in Susa, where king Ahasverus (Xerxes) resides. Archaeologists have been able to identify several ruins with buildings mentioned by the author of Esther although the plot of the story is known to be fictional. The city is also the reputed location of the tomb of the Prophet Daniel.*



*Ancient Susa*

## ESTHER

Esther 1-4

Jews Serving the King of Persia

Esther 5-10

A New Celebration: Purim

**PROMISE:** "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you



and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" (4:13b-14)

Xerxes of Persia had been king 3 years when he celebrated his empire building success with an 180 day open house for everyone of importance in his kingdom. Afterwards, he invited any man living in the citadel of Susa, the capital city, to a week-long feast, with all the wine they could drink. Meanwhile his wife, Queen Vashti, gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace. At the end of the week, the king wanted to show off his beautiful wife to the men, and sent for her. Vashti refused to come, and when asked, one of the king's advisors said her behaviour would make all the women of the kingdom dispise their husbands the way she had - with disrespect and discord. The king agreed to issue an irpealably decree stating that Vishti was never to enter his presence again, and her position given to someone else. The law proclaimed that every man should be ruler over his own household.

Eventually commissioners went throughout the kingdom to find and bring beautiful girls into the king's harem in Susa. Mordecai, a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin from Jerusalem, lived in Susa. He was raising a young cousin, an orphan who was not only beautiful in form and features, but obedient, intelligent, and socially pleasing. Named Hadassah, she was called Esther. Mordecai took an opportunity to serve the king, and Esther went with a eunuch to enter the king's harem. She was served special food and given special treatments with oil of myrrh (for 6 months) and of perfumes and cosmetics (for 6 months). Anytime after 12 months, each girl had a turn to go to King Xerxes in the evening. Another eunuch in charge of the concubines would come for her the next morning. Esther's turn came 4 years after Vashti lost her thone. The king eventually chose Esther to be his queen, and gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials to see her. Esther continued obeying Mordecai not to reveal her nationality.

When Mordecai overheard a plot to kill the king from his seat at the king's gate and told Esther, she reported it to the king, giving Mordecai credit. But later it was observed at the kings gate that Mordecai wouldn't bow to Haman, King Xerxes' top noble. Insulted, when Haman heard that Mordecai was a Jew, he presented a plan to the king to kill ALL the Jews in the kingdom. The king approved, and Mordecai and the Jews went into loud mourning in sackcloth. Esther heard of Mordecai's distress and sent a eunuch to find out what was wrong. Mordecai sent the man back with a copy of the edict to explain it to Esther and tell her to go to the king to beg for mercy. She sent Hathach back to explain how dangerous it was to approach the king without being summoned. Even the queen would be put to death unless the king wanted to see her. If you

are silent, Mordecai told her, deliverance will arise from somewhere else, but you and your father's family will die. Could this be why you came to a royal position at this time? Esther agreed to try, if all the Jews in Susa would fast 3 days and nights for her first. She and her maids would also fast. "When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And," she said, "if I perish, I perish."

## **Commentary on the Book Esther**

### **CHAPTER 1**

#### **1. Vashti deposed**

**Verses 1-9. Ahasuerus' feast**

**Verses 1-22. Vashti's deposition**

#### **THE FIRST FEAST OF THE KING (vv. 1-4)**

Ahasuerus was a name given to the chief king of Persia. The Ahasuerus of verse 1 is recorded in history as Xerxes 1. His empire extended over a very large area, including 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia. The capital of his empire was Shushan, a beautiful city surrounded by mountains and rich in vegetation. It is here called a citadel, for it was a fortress, a castle built not only for residence, but for military defense (v. 2).

It was in the third year of his reign that he entertained all of his officials and servants including representatives of the many provinces, with a great feast that lasted for 180 days! (v. 4). What was his object? He wanted to impress them with the splendour of his own glory! The wealth expended on this celebration must have been enormous. No doubt he had many things to show to these visitors make them marvel that he was so greatly increased in riches.

#### **THE FEAST FOR ALL THE PEOPLE (vv. 5-8)**

Possibly not all were able to be present for the full time, but the king desired a grand conclusion to this event by inviting all the people to a feast lasting seven days, provided in the court of the garden of the king's palace (v. 5). The description of the luxurious circumstances of this is given in verses 6-7, which shows how the religious world likes to adopt for itself principles they recognize to be beautiful, but become only a show without reality. For in reality white and blue linen speak of the purity (white) and heavenly character (blue) of God's testimony among His people. Purple speaks of royal character and the silver

rods speak of redemption; all of these being of vital value to those who are redeemed by the blood of Christ. When in the hands of merely religious formalists, however, it is really only imitation, adopted because attractive.

Marble pillars are imposing, and speak of God's sustaining power, while couches of gold and silver speak of resting places where God's glory (gold) is present and redemption (silver) is known. But formal religion, though it often speaks of giving glory to God, does not even know whereof it speaks: it indulges merely in lip service. Redemption (silver) is unknown to the Persians, though they may imitate it because it seems so nice.

Drinks were served in golden vessels, all being different from the others. All of this lavish provision was "according to the generosity of the king" (v. 7). If a Persian king was able to make such a feast as this for all his subjects, how much more able is our great God to provide in glory a feast of unending wonder for those who know Him as revealed in His beloved Son, the Lord Jesus!

Because Ahasuerus had wealth for it, he could show a most magnanimous spirit in this great provision and at the same time fully indulge the people's desire as to whether or not they wanted to drink. This is a striking imitation of the grace of God, who provides every necessity with no legal bondage, encouraging each believer to act on his own faith. But even in Christendom, ungodly men turn the grace of God into lewdness (Jude 4), just as the king was thinking merely of his own gratification.

### **THE QUEEN'S FEAST AND HER DEFIANCE (vv. 9-12)**

A feast also was made at the same time for the women, by Queen Vashti. Thus the celebration of the splendor of the kingdom was complete.

On the last day of the feast, Ahasuerus had no doubt consumed too much wine, and commanded seven eunuchs to go and bring Vashti back with them with the object of displaying her beauty before all the people (vv. 10-11). Why did he need to do this? Simply because it was to his credit that he had such a beautiful wife, just as all the glory of the kingdom was to his credit. Such is the pride of the natural man.

However, one jarring note marred this celebration. Vashti refused to come (v.12). What reason she had we are not told. The king had not expected any such refusal, and he became furious. His authority had been challenged by one from whom he would expect fullest cooperation.

## VASHTI DEPOSED (vv. 13-22)

The king then consulted with seven prominent princes of Persia as to what action should be taken in regard to Vashti's defiance of his order (vv. 13-15). The Medes and Persians prided themselves on having just laws which could not be changed (Dan. 6:12), and the king's question therefore was, what should be done **according to law**. Nebuchadnezzar would not have required such consultation: he was an absolute dictator: "whomever he wished, he executed; whomever he wished he kept alive; whomever he wished he set up; and whomever he wished, he put down" (Dan. 5:19).

One of the princes, Memucan, took the lead in suggesting what should be done. He said that Vashti had not only wronged the king, but also all the princes and all the people who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus (v. 16). No doubt it was true that Vashti's behaviour would become well known to all women, so that they would feel free to despise the authority of their husbands unless drastic action was promptly taken (vv. 17-18). Memucan therefore made the suggestion that if the king agreed, a royal decree would be proclaimed and recorded in the laws of the Persians and Medes, therefore unchangeable, that Vashti be banished and her royal position given to another woman better than she (v. 19).

The Annotated Bible by A.C. Gabelin records that "Jewish tradition gives several reasons why Memucan was so hostile to Vashti. One is that his own wife had not been invited to Vashti's feast, and another, because he wanted his own daughter promoted and become the Queen" ("The Book of Esther, page 86).

Memucan then appealed, not only to the matter of the king's authority in his own house, but his authority also over the kingdom, for prompt action in this case would have the beneficial effect of moving wives to honor their husbands (v. 20). Those who advocate "Women's Lib" today would not be agreeable, but the king and the princes considered such action was necessary to preserve the kingdom from internal corruption and disintegration. Of course the Christian viewpoint differs from this and from the "Women's Lib" viewpoint, but a heathen nation does not act on Christian principles, and neither does "Women's Lib."

The king and the princes were all favorable to Memucan's solution to the problem (v. 21), and letters were sent to all the provinces under the king's rule to the effect that every man should be master in his own house. Thus the letter practically agreed with the Christian principle that the husband is head of the

wife (Eph. 5:23), but it failed to agree with the instructions given to husbands in this same chapter, "Husbands, love your wives" and "husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies" (Eph. 5:25,28).

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **2. Esther made queen**

#### **Verses 1-4. Search for Vashti's successor**

#### **Verses 5-23. Mordecai and Esther**

#### **ESTHER CHOSEN AS QUEEN (vv. 1-18)**

We read nothing more as to Vashti, whether she was simply banished from the king's court or killed. But it was four years before the king married a queen to take Vashti's place (cf. ch. 1:3 and ch. 2:16). For this marriage there was much preparation. The king's servants advised the king to appoint officers throughout all his kingdom to pick out beautiful virgins and send them to Shushan, to be under the custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who would supervise their being provided with every artificial means of enhancing their beauty (vv. 2-3). In due time the king would interview these women individually and decide which of them he wanted (v. 4). The king was glad to put this plan into action.

Now we are introduced to a certain Jew, Mordecai, who lived in the city of Shushan. We may wonder why, if he loved his nation, he had not returned to Jerusalem when the Persian king had given his permission for any Jews to return. But evidently there was a very large number of Jews who preferred to remain in Persia. Mordecai's grandfather had been carried captive by the Babylonians, but since that was over 70 years previously, Mordecai was no doubt born in Persia, as were the great majority of Jews who lived during that captivity.

Mordecai had brought up his cousin Hadasseh, or Esther, since she was an orphan. Since neither of her parents were living, it was not hard to conceal the fact that she was Jewish, though she had been adopted by Mordecai, a Jew. If people generally were aware of the fact that she was Jewish, there would have been strong objection to her being allowed to be an applicant for the the place of Queen in Persia. We are told that the young woman was "lovely and beautiful" (v. 7).

When the king's decree became known, many young women gathered at the castle, Esther being among them, and she was one chosen to be taken to the

king's palace in care of Hegai, the custodian of the women. Hegai was pleased with her, so that he provided everything necessary for the purpose of enhancing her beauty, giving her also seven maidens who would help her prepare for an audience with the king. In fact, Hegai was so impressed with her that he gave her the best place in the house of the women (v. 9).

At the advice of Mordecai, Esther had not revealed her nationality (v. 10). Some have thought this was deception, but without taking sides in this matter, we know that God used the whole circumstance to work for great blessing to the Jews, in spite of not allowing His name to be identified with all that was done. In fact, we may rightly question whether a Jewish woman should think of being married to a Persian, whether king or not, and whether Mordecai should encourage such a union. But the Jews were in such a state that they had virtually forgotten what was becoming to Jewish character. Mordecai walked every day before the court of the women's quarters, anxious to hear any news of Esther's progress (v. 11). He was not content that the Jews should be despised in this foreign land, but had aspirations for his adopted daughter, who might be a means by which the Jews would receive more honor. Certainly this is not to be the Christian attitude, and we cannot say that God ordered Mordecai to engage in this project, for the honour of God was not Mordecai's object, but the blessing of the Jews. On the other hand, God was concerned about the Jews too, though He could not associate His name with them at the time.

All of the women applicants were given 12 months of preparation! (v. 12). Thus, the unbelieving world thinks it can improve on the beauty of those whom God has created, by various artificial means. Very likely the king would have been just as impressed with Esther if there had not been this long delay, for Hegai at the beginning gave her the best place among the women.

Each young woman in turn was interviewed by the king as though they were applying for employment. They were given anything they desired to take with them, whether make up, perfumes, delicate clothing, flowers or anything they might consider helpful in appealing to the king (v. 13). To a believer, what are all these surface things compared to the moral and spiritual beauty he sees in a prospective wife? Compare 1 Peter 3:4.

What was involved in the interview we are not told, except that each woman went for this in the evening and returned in the morning to the custody of Shaashgaz, a eunuch who was in charge of the king's concubines (v. 14). We might ask, where did she sleep? -- but we have no answer.

When Esther's turn came, she asked for nothing extra, very likely because her faith was in God, however weak that faith may have been (v. 15). Another note is added here, that all who saw her were favourable toward her. She was taken to the king in the tenth month of the seventh year of the king's reign, four years after Vashti was deposed (v. 16).

Though the king had a large number of women to choose from, he loved Esther more than any of the others (v. 17), so he set the royal crown on her head. This was a plain step in the working of God behind the scenes on behalf of the Jews. The king made a great feast for Esther, inviting all his officials and servants, proclaiming a holiday on this occasion (v. 18).

### **MORDECAI'S WARNING TO THE KING (vv. 19-23)**

We read that "Mordecai sat within the king's gate." Apparently this was allowed to any citizen and Mordecai took advantage of it so as to be as near to Esther as he could, though Esther had not revealed her nationality, in obedience to Mordecai's instructions to her (vv. 19-20). It seems strange that the king had not inquired into Esther's background, but oftentimes it is clearly the case that "truth is stranger than fiction." Also these circumstances are a part of God's working behind the scenes.

While Mordecai was sitting in the gate, a place of discussion of many matters, specially concerning the kingdom, he learned that two of the king's servants who were doorkeepers were embittered against the king and plotted his overthrow (v. 21). He was able to tell this to Esther, who informed the king in Mordecai's name (v. 22). The king had this matter investigated, and when the warning of Mordecai was confirmed, the two conspirators were hanged, and the incident was recorded in the book of the chronicles of the king of Persia.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **3. Haman's plot**

#### **Verses 1-6. Haman's promotion**

#### **Verses 7-15. Haman's plot to exterminate the Jews**

### **HAMAN'S ADVANCEMENT AND CONSPIRACY (vv. 1-15)**

After this (though we are not told how long after) King Ahasuerus promoted Haman, an Agagite, to a position above all the princes (v. 1). Agag had been the king of the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:8), who were bitter enemies of Israel from the

time Israel came out of Egypt (Ex. 17:8-16) concerning whom God said He would utterly blot out the remembrance of them from under heaven (Ex. 17:8-14). King Saul had later spared Agag when destroying the Amalekites, but "Samuel hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord" (1 Sam. 15:32-33). We may wonder how this man Haman came into the favour of a Persian king, but this is not explained.

Ahasuerus gave command that all the servants who were in the gate should bow in allegiance to Haman, but Mordecai would not bow to him. The king's servants saw this and asked why he disobeyed the king's commandment (v. 3). He told them he was a Jew, no doubt inferring that it would be wrong for him to bow to Haman. Eventually the servants brought the matter to Haman's attention, including the fact that Mordecai was a Jew. Of course Haman, every time he passed the gate, would particularly observe Mordecai and his not bowing to Haman, so that the man was filled with anger (vv. 4-5). Haman was a shrewd man who bitterly hated all Jews, so that he conceived a plan of not only getting rid of Mordecai, but all the Jews in the realm of King Ahasuerus (vv. 5-6). But Haman was a religious man of the superstitious sort. He with others (perhaps his relatives) cast lots to determine the best day on which to approach the king with the project of getting rid of the Jews (v. 7). His confidence was really in Satan, and just as is often the case **at first**, this cunning approach worked.

In petitioning the king, Haman did not even mention that he was speaking of the Jews, but told Ahasuerus that there was "a certain people scattered and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of our kingdom: their laws are different from all other people's, and they do not keep the king's laws. Therefore it is not fitting for the king to let them remain" (v. 8). He asked therefore that a decree should be written that these people should be destroyed; but he immediately added that he himself would pay 10,000 talents of silver "into the hands of those who do the work, to bring it into the king's treasury" (v. 9).

Surely the king ought to have realized that Haman had a personal axe to grind since he would personally pay this great amount to have this people destroyed. But the king evidently had a great deal of confidence in this conniving Amalakite who had far more concern for his own reputation than he had for the Persian kingdom. The king therefore agreed, and gave Haman liberty to do just as he desired (vv. 10-11). It seems strange that the king would consult with the princes as to what to do about Vashti (ch. 1:13-15), but in this far more serious case that he would act as though he were a dictator!

The king's scribes were then called to write a decree "according to all that Haman commanded," addressed to all the officials of the kingdom in every



province, sealed with the king's signet (v. 12). These letters were then sent by couriers to all the king's provinces, with instructions to the people to kill and annihilate all the Jews, young and old, women and children on one appropriate day, and to take all their possessions as plunder. Haman had taken fullest advantage of the king's permission, having copies of the document sent everywhere (v. 14), declaring this slaughter as law, which law could not be changed, for the Medes and Persians prided themselves on having unchangeable laws (Dan. 6:8).

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **4-5. Esther's intercession before the king**

#### **4:1-17. Esther's decision to go before the king**

#### **5:1-14. The king received Esther**

#### **ESTHER AGREES TO INTERCEDE (vv. 1-17)**

Mordecai of course very soon learned of this satanic plot of Haman against Israel and he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes in token of humiliation and repentance. Whether he prayed to God we are not told, but he cried out bitterly in the midst of the city, coming to the outside of the king's gate, though forbidden to come into the gate clothed in sackcloth (vv. 1-2).

At the same time, everywhere the decree of Haman had been sent, the Jews fasted with weeping and wailing, many clothed in sackcloth. Again, nothing is said of whether they prayed to God (v. 3). No doubt God makes this purposely obscure because of Israel's unfaithfulness to Him.

Esther soon received the news of Mordecai through her maids and the eunuchs of the king's court. It naturally distressed her to think that Mordecai was clothed in sackcloth, but she did not know the reason. She sent clothing to him to replace the sackcloth, but he refused it (v. 4). Therefore she sent Hatach, a eunuch of the king, to ask Mordecai the reason for his condition (v. 5). Even Hatach had not heard of the evil plot of Haman, and Mordecai told him what had happened and how Haman had promised to pay a large sum of money for the destruction of the Jews (vv. 6-7).

Mordecai gave to Hatach a copy of the king's decree to show to Esther with a full explanation of Haman's plot, and with instructions for her to supplicate the king for the preservation of her people, the Jews (v. 8). On hearing this, Esther

sent a reply to Mordecai, telling him that it was well known that anyone who dared to enter the inner court of the king without an invitation would be put to death unless the king held out his sceptre toward the individual. Esther herself had not been called into the king's presence for 30 days (vv. 9-11).

Then Mordecai sent an urgent response to Esther, "Do not think in your heart that you will escape in the king's palace any more than will the other Jews. For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish" (vv. 13-14). It may be that Mordecai had confidence that God would intervene on behalf of the Jews, though again he does not even mention the Lord. He also asked her a very pertinent question as to whether Esther had come to her present position for the very purpose of meeting this serious attack of the enemy. Certainly this proved to be true.

Esther therefore sent word to Mordecai to gather all the Jews in Shushan to fast on Esther's behalf, not to eat or drink for three days, saying that she and her maids would do likewise, then she would go in to the king. She added, "If I perish, I perish!" (v. 16). Fasting is negative, symbolizing self-judgment, but what of the more important positive action of prayer to God? There is no mention made of this. We should think they **would** pray, but God omits any mention of prayer because of the Jews' unprofitable spiritual condition.

Mordecai did as Esther asked, so that all the Jews in Shushan were drawn together in a common cause, and all would be informed now that the Queen was Jewish.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **ESTHER'S BANQUET (vv. 1-8)**

After the three days of fasting, Esther's courage enabled her to enter the inner court of the king's palace, clothed in her royal robes. The king was sitting on his throne, and there is no doubt that God disposed his heart to hold out his golden scepter toward Esther. We can imagine the relief of her heart when he did this! Esther then approached and touched the top of the scepter. The king's words to her were most magnanimous, offering her whatever she wanted, to the half of his kingdom! King Herod later made such a foolish promise to the daughter of Herodias because her dancing pleased him (Mk. 6:22-23). But Esther did not take criminal advantage of the king as did the daughter of Herodias. She asked that the king and Haman would come that day to a banquet she had prepared (v. 4).

At the banquet, however, Esther did not divulge the purpose of her plans. The king asked her again what she desired, but she only asked for the presence of the king and Haman at a second banquet the next day, when she would make her request. Why did she do this? So that the pride of Haman would be built up to such a level that his fall would be that much greater.

### **HAMAN PLOTS THE MURDER OF MORDECAI (vv. 9-14)**

Haman was sitting on cloud 9! He left the banquet with a joyful heart. Yet there was one matter that greatly annoyed him. Mordecai was in the king's gate, evidently having changed from his sackcloth, but he gave Haman no recognition whatever (v. 9). So Haman's joy was spoiled by intense anger. He did not even comfort himself by the anticipation that Mordecai would be destroyed with all the Jews quite soon.

Returning home, Haman called for his friends as well as his wife to boast of how much wealth he had gotten, the children he had and his promotion to a place above all the princes of the kingdom. Besides this, he adds, "Queen Esther invited no one but me to come in with the king to the banquet that she had prepared, and tomorrow I am again invited by her, along with the king" (v. 12). Certainly the balloon was being over inflated, but Haman did not realize it was ready to burst!

### **HAMAN AS PICTURE OF THE ANTICHRIST**

"Yet" he says, "all this avails me nothing so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting in the king's gate" (v. 13). Symbolically, Haman is a very striking picture of the coming antichrist, determined to destroy the people of Israel. Who is it who stands in his way? Certainly it is the true Christ, the Son of God, though Mordecai is but a faint type of the Lord Jesus, as will be seen very soon in this book.

Haman's wife and friends had a ready solution to his problem. Let him have a gallows made, 75 feet high! and ask the king to have Mordecai hanged on it. Thus he could have Mordecai killed before the rest of the Jews. This pleased Haman, so he had the gallows made (v. 14). Now he could anticipate having the deep pleasure of seeing his particular enemy suffer and die in the sight of all the people of Shushan! Thus everything was going to be to the advantage of this proud and wicked enemy of God!

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **6-7. Mordecai honoured; Haman hanged**

#### **6:1-14. Mordecai honoured by the king.**

#### **7:1-10. Haman hanged**

The same night that Haman had had a gallows made on which to hang Mordecai, the Lord intervened in a most amazing way, causing the king to be unable to sleep and moving him to have the book of records of the kingdom brought to him (v.1). When some of the records were read to him, one of these awakened his attention, for it told that Mordecai had virtually saved the king's life when he informed him of the plot against him by two of his doorkeepers. In asking about this he found that Mordecai had been given no recognition at all for this very real kindness.

God's working behind the scenes is further evident when the king asked who happened to be in the court. Haman had just entered with the intention of asking permission to hang Mordecai (v. 4), so the king had him brought in, asking him what he thought should be done to the man whom the king delighted to honor (v. 6). Haman's pride was such that he considered himself the man the king referred to. What a blunder! But he wanted the popular acclaim of all the people, so suggested that the man to be honoured should be clothed in a royal robe which the king himself had worn, and placed on a horse that the king had ridden, which had a royal crest on its forehead, then led by one of the king's most noble princes through the city square with a proclamation to the effect that this was done to the man whom the king delighted to honour (vv. 7-9).

What a shock it must have been to Haman to have the king tell him to take the robe and horse and do all that he had suggested to Mordecai the Jew! (v. 10). It seems that up to this time the king did not realize that the people whose destruction he had approved were Jews. Haman had not told him this, though the letters sent by the couriers throughout all the land had stated it in no uncertain terms (ch. 3:13), for the king had told Haman to do as he pleased about that matter, so there was no need for the king to ever read the proclamation.

What could Haman do? His hands were tied. He could only obey the word of the king in spite of his bitter hatred against Mordecai. In parading Mordecai through the city square, it must have been extremely galling to Haman to have to proclaim before him, "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honour" (v. 11).

After this Haman could hardly ask the king's permission to hang Mordecai! He returned to his house in grief, utterly humiliated. But he found no consolation from his friends or his wife. They knew that since Mordecai was a Jew and exalted by the king to great honor, this presaged worse trouble yet for Haman, who had plotted the destruction of all Jews.

But this day was that on which Esther had planned a banquet for the king and Haman. He must go immediately to the banquet. Likely he would go with some ray of hope that Esther's invitation would prove helpful in resolving the matter of his serious problem as regards Mordecai, for he did not know that Esther was a Jewess and also related to Mordecai.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **HAMAN HANGED ON HIS OWN GALLOWS (vv. 1-10)**

At Esther's second banquet the king asked her to make whatever petition she desired, with the promise that he would grant it to her. What a surprise it would be to both the king and Haman that she asked that she and her people might be spared from total destruction! (v. 3). "For," she said, "we have been sold, my people and I, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. Had we been sold as male and female slaves, I would have held my tongue, although the enemy could never compensate for the king's loss" (v. 4). What astonishing words these would be to the king! Haman however would realize (with astonishment too) that Esther must be a Jewess, whose nation he plotted to destroy.

The king, not yet connecting Haman's recent edict with the Jewish nation, asked indignantly, "Who is he, and where is he, who would dare presume in his heart to do such a thing?" Esther's response was brief, but like a lightning bolt, "The adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman!" (v. 6). The king was wise enough not to erupt in an outburst of anger toward Haman at the moment, but taking time to think in quietness, he went into the palace garden. Haman remained with Esther, pleading for his life, for he knew the king would not pass by an evil so great as he was guilty of (v. 7). When the king was composed sufficiently to return, he found Haman fallen across the couch where Esther was. Though he was no doubt mistaken in thinking that Haman intended to assault the queen, yet this appeared to him to be the case, and when he so spoke, the servants covered Haman's face (v. 8), for Haman had forfeited all title to see the light.

The situation was so electric that at that moment the king would be ready to act without hesitation, and immediately one servant took the opportunity to

announce to the king that Haman had made a gallows on which he planned to hang Mordecai. This would increase the tension, and The king did not hesitate to command, "Hang him on it!" (v. 9). Thus the evil that Haman planned came back violently on his own head, as Ecclesiastes 10:8 warns, "He who digs a pit will fall into it."

## **CHAPTER 8**

### **8. The edict of deliverance**

#### **Verses 1-2. Mordecai's exaltation**

#### **Verses 3-17. Revocation of the edict**

### **A SECOND EDICT CONCERNING THE JEWS (vv. 1-17)**

In all of the history we have considered, we cannot but discern the working of God as will be the case in the Great Tribulation period. Mordecai is a type of Christ, the chief object of the enemy's hatred, yet eventually triumphant. Esther is a faint picture of the intercessory work of Christ on behalf of Israel. Haman pictures the antichrist, exalting himself to the highest position possible, but finally abased, destroyed by the brightness of the coming of the Lord.

King Ahasuerus immediately gave Esther all the possessions of Haman. The enemy being spoiled left great spoil for God's chosen one. Esther also revealed her relationship with Mordecai to the king, and the king gave to Mordecai the signet ring he had previously given to Haman, thus virtually appointing Mordecai a prime minister of Persia (v. 2). Esther then committed to Mordecai the responsibility for the house of Haman. Thus, when the Jewish remnant is honoured by the authorities of this world, they will transfer this honour willingly to the Lord Jesus.

However, the edict of Haman, sealed with the king's signet, could not be revoked, for the laws of the Medes and Persians were considered to be divinely ordered, and therefore unchangeable. What could be done about such a situation? Esther again ventured her life in coming before the king, but no doubt without the fear she had before, for he had proven his love for her. When the king held out his sceptre to her, she implored him with tears to counteract the evil of Haman's scheme to destroy the Jews. "For," she says, "How can I endure to see the evil that will come to my people?" (v. 6).

Certainly the heart of the king could not fail to be moved by his beloved wife pleading in this way. Therefore he spoke to both Esther and Mordecai,

reminding them that he had given the house of Haman to Esther, and telling them to write a decree as they saw fit that would be for the protection of the Jews from harm (vv. 7-8). They could not revoke the previous decree, but they found a way to preserve the Jews in spite of it. This second decree was sent as widely as the first, throughout all the lands of the Persian empire, from India to Ethiopia, to every people in their own language. The message was written in the name of King Ahasuerus, sealed with the king's signet ring, and sent by couriers on horseback, using thoroughbred horses chosen for their swiftness (vv. 9-10).

These letters authorized the Jews in all these places to gather together to protect their own lives, thus having permission to destroy, kill and annihilate any people who assaulted them on the 13th day of the 12th month, the day that the first decree had authorized the killing of the Jews (vv. 11-12). Thus, though the laws of the Medes and Persians could not be changed, the first edict was really rendered ineffective by the second, and done so legally.

This is a very striking picture of the way Israel will be preserved and blessed through the Tribulation. Her sins against God have by law merited the solemn sentence of death. But God in great mercy will intervene to give life instead of death. It is the same as regards all mankind today. The law of God has passed the sentence of death upon all men. But by sending His own Son to bear sin's penalty on Calvary, God has intervened for the blessing of all who will receive His Son as Saviour and Lord.

The first decree would at least serve the purpose of exposing who were the enemies of the Jews, and when they took advantage of the that decree to attack the Jews, then the Jews would take advantage of the second decree to defend themselves and to kill their enemies. Though God's name is not mentioned, yet the Jews could depend on God to fight for them also. The couriers, in bearing their message, were impressed with the urgency of the matter, so that the Jews would be fully prepared for the crucial day (v. 14).

The king had Mordecai clothed in royal apparel of blue and white with a great crown of gold and a garment of fine linen and purple (v. 15). Though Persia was no doubt ignorant of the significance of these things in God's eyes, yet scripture considers blue as the heavenly colour and white as the purity of moral character. Therefore Mordecai is seen by scripture as a type of the Lord Jesus, the Man from heaven in whom is moral perfection. The crown of gold reminds us that Christ is far more than man, for gold speaks of the glory of God. Among the nations the practice of a king wearing a gold crown is common, but it is only an imitation of the glory that really belongs to God. The only man entitled to such glory is the Lord Jesus, for He is God. The garment of fine linen and purple

symbolizes the fact that kingly glory (the purple) belongs to Christ, but united with the grace of perfect purity (the fine linen). The rich man of Luke 16:19 was clothed in purple and fine linen, but this was an empty show. Christ on earth was clothed in the garments of the poor, but He will soon have His rightful place, with garments of glory and beauty.

Consistently with Mordecai's exaltation, "the Jews had light and gladness, joy and honor" (v. 16), and this will be wonderfully true when Christ is recognized by Israel at the beginning of the millennium. The blessing of this was spread throughout all the land by the reception of the decree of the king, and the Jews were so greatly blessed that they called a holiday for celebration, and many of the Gentiles became proselytes, taking their place with Israel. While this may not be the case in the millennium, yet the rejoicing of the Gentiles over the blessing of Israel will be remarkably seen, such as is pictured in the rejoicing of the Queen of Sheba for Israel's sake when she came to visit Solomon (1 Kings 10:6-9).

## **CHAPTER 9**

### **9. Origin of the Feast of Purim**

#### **Verses 1-16. Vindication of the Jew's enemies**

#### **Verses 17-32. Institution of Purim**

### **THE JEWS VICTORIOUS (vv. 1-17)**

On the day prescribed in both decrees, when the enemies of the Jews expected to destroy all the Jews in the Persian empire, the tables were turned completely, for besides having the king's permission to fight for their lives, the Jews were given power from God to defeat and destroy all their enemies (v. 1). As it was permitted them, the Jews gathered together to make a united stand against the many who sought their destruction, and their energy was such that no one could withstand them (v. 2). In fact, all the officials of government helped the Jews because Mordecai's position of prominence influenced them greatly (v.3). In a coming day too the greatness of the Lord Jesus will have wonderful effect in turning Gentiles to seek the true blessing of Israel.

At this time Mordecai's greatness increased tremendously throughout all the kingdom of Persia (v. 4). Though Christ today is still despised and rejected of men, yet God knows how to change that fact amazingly, as He will when Israel bows to His authority. Then not only Israel will be blessed, but the nations of the world will give allegiance to Him who is "King of kings and Lord of lords."



Thus the victory of the Jews was complete. We read of no Jews being killed, but the number of their enemies killed was great. In Shushan alone on that day 500 were killed. Ten men are mentioned by name who were evidently leaders, as well as the ten sons of Haman. Interestingly, the Jews did not take any plunder from their enemies (v. 10), which shows they were not moved by lust for gain, a picture of the pure justice that will characterize the establishment of the kingdom of the Lord Jesus.

When information was given to the king as to the number killed in Shushan, the king spoke of this to Esther and asked her if she had any further petition (vv. 11-12). She asked that another day be given in order to rid Shushan of the Jews' enemies, and also to have Haman's ten sons hanged (v. 13). Of course, this was after they had been killed, therefore intended to impress the populace with the enormity of Haman's guilt. The king gave his consent to this. Haman's sons were hanged, and the Jews gathered together the next day, killing 300 enemies of the Jews. It must have been that those 300 had before shown themselves to be the Jews' enemies. Again, the Jews did not take any plunder.

Only at Shushan did the second day's slaughter take place. The Jews throughout the rest of the land in gathering together, killed 75,000 of their enemies in the one day, the 13th day of the month Adar, and they also took no plunder (v. 16). On the 14th day they rested and made the day one of feasting and gladness (v. 17). God had made their victory complete, though even then His name is not mentioned.

### **THE FEAST OF PURIM INSTITUTED (vv. 18-32)**

The Jews at Shushan, however, having engaged for two days in destroying their enemies, rested on the 15th day of the month, making it a day of feasting and gladness (v. 18). Since those in the surrounding villages had done this on the 14th day of the month (v. 19), Mordecai wrote letters to all the Jews that both the 14th and 15th days of that month were to be considered holidays for the Jews from that time every year, a time for giving gifts to one another and to the poor (vv. 20-22). The Jews accepted this as a yearly feast because they considered that the memory of this whole occasion should not be allowed to fade from their minds. Thus, verses 24-25 recount briefly the history of the plot of Haman the Agagite to annihilate the Jews, casting Pur, that is, the lot, which in the case of Haman, was identified with the consultation of evil spirits. But though his scheme at first seemed to be successful, by the intervention of Esther whom the king not only respected, but loved, there was a complete exposure of the whole plot, with the result that the wickedness of Haman recoiled on his own

head, he and his sons being hanged on the gallows he had erected for Mordecai.

We are not told who wrote this book of Esther, but whoever it was was conversant with the Jewish captivity in Persia and knew this history well. It seems he would not deliberately avoid using God's name in the book; but the book is a vital part of God's word, who would not publicly link His name with Israel, though working for them behind the scenes.

The feast of two days at this time established by the Jews was called Purim, referring to Pur, the lot cast by Haman with the object of destroying the Jews. Very likely the Jews were conversant with Solomon's proverb, "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord" (Proverbs 16:33). Haman had expected demon power to be exerted in backing him up; but no doubt the Jews recognized that the Lord had intervened with His own clear decision. Yet, while the Jews surely did recognize the Lord's hand in this, still, God did not allow His name to be even mentioned publicly.

The feast of Purim was thus established and imposed by the Jews upon themselves and their descendants with the urgent responsibility of celebrating these days every year, and continued in every family of the Jews, wherever they were, that the memory of this great occasion should not be allowed to fade from their minds (vv. 26-28).

We may be sure that news of this occasion reached the returned remnant of Judah in

Jerusalem with little delay. Though they had shown devoted faithfulness to the Lord in returning to the land, they would surely not have hard feelings toward those who had not returned, rather would be concerned as to how their brethren fared in the foreign country. Out of love for their brethren, no doubt they would gladly adopt the celebration of the feast of Purim. Indeed, through all the centuries this feast has continued among the Jews.

In all of these instructions it seems strange that God is not mentioned, though it is plainly evident that it was God's hand of protecting care that had been over the Jews to deliver them from their enemies. Very likely the Jews did include God's name in their celebration, but scripture says nothing of this because the condition of the Jews at that time was really lacking in any evidence of obedience to God. He was virtually disowning them publicly though caring for them behind the scenes.

Thus, the history here speaks of Purim as a feast of the Jews, not a “feast of the Lord.” Leviticus 23:1 speaks of “The Feasts of the the Lord,” but in John 2:13, the Passover is called “the Passover of the Jews,” and another feast of the Lord was called “the Jews’ Feast of Tabernacles” (Jn. 7:2). Why? Because it was not primarily the Lord’s honor that the Jews sought, but their own enjoyment. What sad disrespect for the Lord’s feasts!

Mordecai sent letters to all the Jews in the 127 provinces of the kingdom of Persia with the object of confirming the yearly observance of the Feast of Purim at the appointed time. Esther also was identified with this decree. From that time the observance of the Feast of Purim has been continued in Israel, observed even where Jews are scattered in other lands.

## **CHAPTER 10**

### **4. Epilogue: Mordecai’s greatness**

#### **THE GREATNESS OF AHASUERUS AND MORDECAI**

This remarkable book closes with the announcement of the greatness of the Persian Empire as ruled over by King Ahasuerus. As with every other kingdom of the nations however, this magnificence was only fleeting, for Alexander the Great, being very swiftly exalted to the place of head of the Grecian Empire, overcame and displaced the Persian Empire, as the Lord had prophesied through His servant Daniel (Dan.8:4-7; 8:20-21). But for a brief time Ahasuerus accomplished great things, and specially because he had advanced Mordecai the Jew to a position of great prominence. Mordecai is typical of the Lord Jesus in His being given His place of great power in the millennium. It is always true that when this blessed Son of God is given His true place, whether in a nation or in the history of an individual, the result is great blessing.

King Ahasuerus in this case serves as a very faint type of God the Father, for whose glory

the Lord Jesus will eventually reign. But all types must pass away, that Christ may take His place as Lord of all. The believer longs for the accomplishment of this great end, not simply that this may mean great blessing for us, but rather that Christ will be supremely glorified, in perfect unity with the Father.

No mention is made of Mordecai’s death, since he is a type of Christ whose kingdom will have no end. Having once died as a sacrifice for sin, now in resurrection He “dieth no more.” Mordecai then continued being well received

by the Jews, seeking the good of his people and speaking peace to all his countrymen, a lovely picture of the peace of the kingdom of the Lord Jesus.

The post-captivity books, Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, etc. Maintain a continuity of the history of Israel that goes on into the New Testament; but the history in Esther is not part of that continuity, for the Jews in Esther were outside their land. The book then is significant in showing something of the Jews' condition for the many centuries they have continued away from the land of promise, being called by God, "not my people," yet still watched over for good, and eventually to be restored to the Lord Jesus, and blessed as never before. What a celebration then!



## The Feast of Purim

### Esther 9:26-32

26: Wherefore they called these days Purim after the name of Pur. Therefore for all the words of this letter, and of that which they had seen concerning this matter, and which had come unto them,

27: The Jews ordained, and took upon them, and upon their seed, and upon all such as joined themselves unto them, so as it should not fail, that

they would keep these two days according to their writing, and according to their appointed time every year;

28: And that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, every family, every province, and every city; and that these days of Purim should not fail from among the Jews, nor the memorial of them perish from their seed.

29: Then Esther the queen, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew, wrote with all authority, to confirm this second letter of Purim.

30: And he sent the letters unto all the Jews, to the hundred twenty and seven provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, with words of peace and truth,

31: To confirm these days of Purim in their times appointed, according as Mordecai the Jew and Esther the queen had enjoined them, and as they had decreed for themselves and for their seed, the matters of the fastings and their cry.

32: And the decree of Esther confirmed these matters of Purim; and it was written in the book.

The Feast of Purim is a Jewish holiday in celebration of the deliverance of the Jews as recorded in the book of Esther. It is also known as the Feast of Lots (*Purim* being the Hebrew word for “lots”). The feast is not mentioned in the New Testament, although scholars believe the unnamed feast of John 5:1 could be Purim.

In Esther, Haman, prime minister to the Persian King Ahasuerus, is insulted by the Jewish leader Mordecai, who refused to bow to Haman. Haman convinces the king that all Jews are rebellious and must be destroyed. To set the date of the genocide, Haman uses lots, or *purim*. Unbeknownst to Haman, Ahasuerus’s queen, Esther, is a Jew and Mordecai’s niece. Esther appeals to Ahasuerus for her people’s lives. The king cannot revoke the decree to attack the Jews, but he does issue a new decree allowing the Jews to defend themselves. As a result, Haman and his family are executed, and the Jews kill 75,000 would-be attackers. To memorialize the victory, Mordecai institutes the Feast of Purim to be celebrated every year (Esther 9:26-32).

Like Hanukah, the Feast of Purim has developed into more of a national holiday than a religious one, although it starts with specific prayers and a reading of the book of Esther. The celebration also involves giving gifts of food to friends, charity to the poor, and a big meal. When the book of Esther is read, the audience joins in, cheering when Mordecai’s name is mentioned, and shouting

and making noise when Haman's is. Wooden noisemakers called *ra'ashan* or "graggers" help with drowning out the name of Haman. Consuming alcohol is usually part of the event, and it's said one should drink until "Cursed is Haman!" sounds the same as "Blessed is Mordecai!" There are also music, dancing, parades, and people dressing in costume.

The idea of celebrating a deliverance has extended to smaller communities and even individual families. Jewish towns and families who experience miraculous deliverance from persecution have been known to enact their own annual celebration, called a "local Purim" or "personal Purim." Often, Jewish and Messianic Jewish communities will open their Feast of Purim to the public

### **Customs and Ritual of Purim**

In the Book of Esther, we read that Purim is a time for "feasting and merrymaking," as well as for "sending gifts to one another and presents to the poor" (Esther 9:22). In addition to reading the *Megillah*, celebrants dress in costumes, have festive parties, perform "Purim-spiels," silly theatrical adaptations of the story of the *Megillah*, send baskets of food (*mishloach manot*) to friends, and give gifts to the poor (*matanot l'evyonim*).

### **Hamantaschen**

Hamantaschen are three-cornered pastries filled with poppy seeds (*mohn* in Yiddish), fruit preserves, chocolate, or other ingredients that are traditionally eaten on Purim. In Israel during the weeks leading up to Purim, the aroma of freshly baked hamantaschen can be smelled on every block.

### **Costumes**

As part of the carnival-like atmosphere of Purim, many children and adults wear costumes. Some attribute this tradition to the fact that Esther initially "masked" her Jewish identity. Now a vibrant and widely practiced custom, some choose to dress as characters from the Purim story, while others select Jewish heroes from throughout history.

In Israel, the celebrations are especially extravagant and exciting. People of all ages take to the streets, rejoicing with parades, parties, costumes and carnivals. The parade through the streets of Tel Aviv is known to be especially wild. At the *Kotel* (the Western Wall) volunteers for Women of the Wall read *Megillat Esther* in the women's section.



*Megillat Esther (The Scroll of Esther)*

### **In the Synagogue**

The *Megillah* (scroll) most often refers to *Megillat Esther* (The Scroll of Esther) which also is known as the “Book of Esther.” According to the Talmud, “The study of Torah is interrupted for the reading of the *Megillah*.” Maimonides, a 12<sup>th</sup> century sage and rabbi, teaches, “The reading of the *Megillah* certainly supersedes all other *mitzvot*.”

Traditionally, the Book of Esther is read at both evening and morning services on Purim—both in North America and in Israel. A number of customs are associated with the reading. Haman, the enemy of the Jews in this story, is associated with all those who have tried to destroy the Jewish people throughout history. Therefore, we make loud noises—verbally or with noisemakers—at every mention of Haman’s name in order to drown it out. Derived from the Polish word meaning “rattle,” a *grager* is the noisemaker used to drown out the name of Haman during the reading of the *Megillah*. Beginning in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Jews throughout Europe sounded the *grager* as a part of their Purim celebrations.



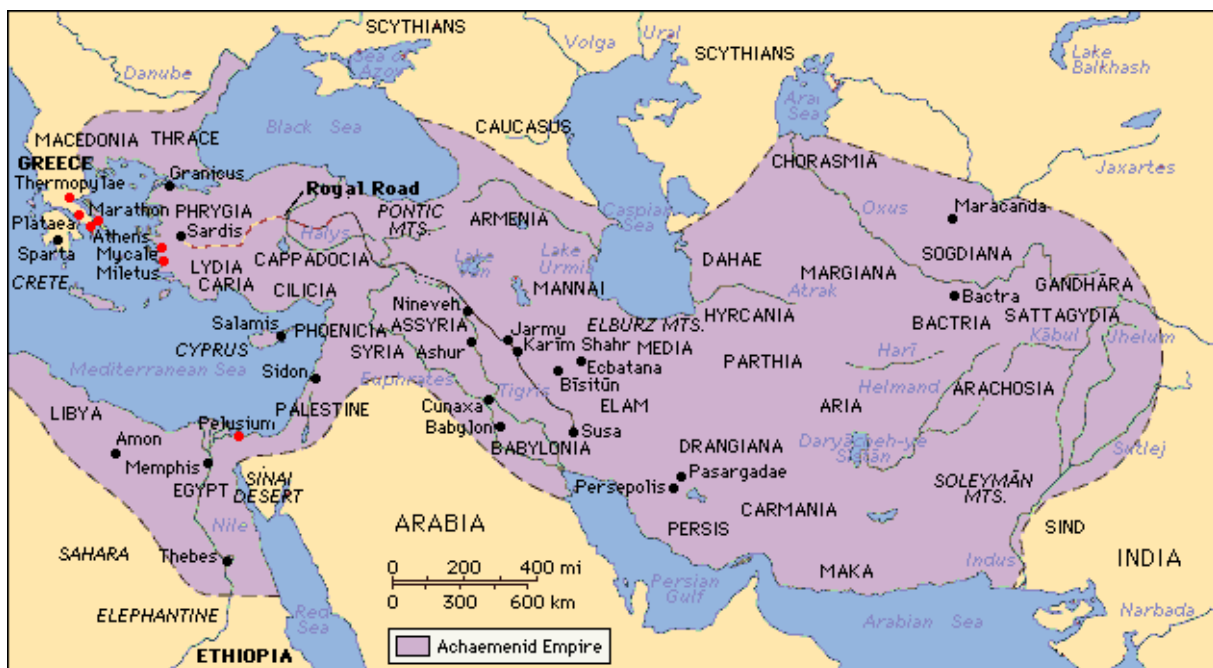
A Purim-spiel (pronounced SHPEEL, rhymes with “reel”) is a humorous skit presented on Purim. Most parody the story of the Book of Esther, but it also is common for participants to take the opportunity to poke some gentle fun at themselves and their idiosyncrasies.

## At Home

*Mishloach manot* are gifts of food that friends (and prospective new friends!) exchange on Purim. Often presented in baskets, most *mishloach manot* include hamantaschen, the traditional three-sided pastry eaten on Purim, but may also include a wide variety of foods and treats. These gifts are frequently referred to by their Yiddish name, *shalachmanos*.

Jewish families make *mishloach manot* baskets at home and distribute them to friends. Many families also make hamantaschen to include in these baskets and to enjoy at home.

*Matanot l'evyonim* (gifts to the poor) are gifts given at this season to those in need so that they, too, can celebrate Purim with a special meal. Many families have committed to participating in this important social justice aspect of the holiday.



*Ancient Persian Empire at greatest extent*



## **Questionnaire on Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther**

1. Study Ezra's love for the law and the house of God in connection with Psalms 119 and 122.
2. What principles of holiness and separation from the world can be learned from the books Ezra and Nehemiah?
3. Study Nehemiah as the man of action, the good man and the man of prayer.
4. What principles found here will be of value for the work of reconstruction today?
5. Study the book of Esther as an illustration of Two New Testament principles:
  - a. 'Whoever exalteth himself shall be abased, and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted' (Luke 14:11)
  - b. 'We know that to them that love God all things work together for good, even to them that love God all things work together for good, even to them that are called according to His purpose' (Romans 8:28).
2. How can the message of the book of Esther on the treatment of minorities be applied to the present day?
3. What parallels to the life of Mordecai can be found in those of Joseph in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon?

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